

PUERTO RICAN RADICALISM IN THE
1970S: EL COMITÉ-MINP

by

ROSE MUZIO

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science
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Abstract

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by

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In this dissertation, I analyze the protest politics of El Comité-MINP, one of the main organizations of the Puerto Rican Left in New York City in the 1970s. My study examines the impact of national identity, racial discrimination, and class, as well as political and ideological development, on the activism of Puerto Ricans who joined a contentious housing movement on Manhattan's West Side and gradually transformed from a community action collective to a Marxist-Leninist cadre organization.

Based on the analyses of various contentious campaigns – including the squatters' movement against urban renewal (known as Operation Move-In), struggles for bilingual education and media inclusion of Latinos, protests by minority construction workers' against job exclusion, student strikes for access to quality higher education, and community-based opposition to the closing of Metropolitan Hospital – this study demonstrates the partial effectiveness of protests that used disruptive tactics and persuasive, inclusive mobilizing frames, to elicit concessions from elites. Local and national structural changes, combined with internal ideological tendencies, reduced opportunities for successful protest outcomes in the second half, as compared to the first half of the decade.

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List of Acronyms

AIFLD – American Institute for Free Labor Development
 CDPHR – Coalition in Defense of Puerto Rican and Hispanic Rights
 CISPE – Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador
 COINTELPRO – Counterintelligence Program
 CUNY – City University of New York
 El Comité-MINP – El Comité-Movimiento de Izquierda Nacional Puertorriqueño (trans. The Committee-Puerto Rican National Left Movement)
 FBI COINTELPRO – Federal Bureau of Investigation Counterintelligence Program
 FEP – Frente Estudiantil Puertorriqueño (trans. Puerto Rican Student Front)
 FOU – Frente Obrero Unido (trans. United Workers’ Front)
 LWC – Latin Women’s Collective
 MIR – Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionario (trans. Revolutionary Left Movement)
 MPI – Movimiento Pro-Independencia (trans. Pro-Independence Movement)
 MPD – Movimiento Popular Dominicano
 NICH – Non-Intervention in Chile
OEM – Obreros en Marcha (trans. Workers on the Move)
 PATBCD – Personal Archive To Be Donated (to CUNY’s Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College)
 PATCO – Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization
 PIP – Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño (Puerto Rican Independence Party)
 PRRWO – Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers’ Party
 PRSC – Puerto Rico Solidarity Committee
 PSP – Puerto Rican Socialist Party
 SDS – Students for a Democratic Society
 SUNY – State University of New York
UL – Unidad Latina (trans. Latino Unity)

Note on Use of Accents in Spanish Names:

I have followed traditional usage of accents in Spanish names, except where the person referenced is known not to use the accent in public documents, as with Mickey Melendez, Benjamin Marquez, Congressman Luis Gutierrez, and Maria Collado.

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CHAPTER 1

Locating Puerto Rican Radicalism in Social Movements

Introduction

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, radical political groups formed across the United States that identified themselves as Marxist-Leninist communist organizations.¹ For the most part, these were small organizations of political activists energized by the civil rights movement of the 1960s but disillusioned with the prospects for meaningful change through formal, institutional means. They were motivated also by the need they perceived to fill the void in the Left created by a “revisionist” and repression-weakened Communist Party and were convinced that their hard-work, dedication, and leadership could generate broad support for socialist revolution (Elbaum 2002). With few direct ties to minority communities, many of these organizations consisted mainly of White students who had admired Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and whose political activism began in the university-based anti-war movement (Elbaum 2002; Whalen and Flacks 1989, 258).

Organizations with similar beliefs developed in communities comprised mainly of national minorities, which sought to address issues of racial and ethnic discrimination, as well as subordination based on class, as manifested in their neighborhood and workplace environments (Aparicio 2006; Marquez 2001; Muñoz 2007). Like White radicals, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, Blacks, Native Americans, and Asians were also influenced by political movements of the 1960s and were drawn to support Third World anti-imperialist and democratization struggles. They viewed their local mobilizations for immediate

¹ In *Revolution in the Air*, Max Elbaum uses the term “new communist movement” to refer collectively to the radical political organizations of the 1970s. A glossary of eighteen of these organizations appears in the Appendix to his book (London: Verso, 2002).

reforms as one level of resistance, while building alliances nationally to oppose western imperialism constituted a second level. Inspired by the Black Panthers' platform of community control and the militancy of the Young Lords and Brown Berets, as well as by Latin American revolutionary movements and the Cuban Revolution, their political action agendas ranged from protesting community-level police brutality to joining national solidarity networks supporting revolutionary and democratization movements in Latin America.² The solidarity networks were the main arena in which Whites and national minorities of the Left interacted.³

In the middle of the 1970s, a portion of the radical organizations in the United States decided to begin a dialogue geared toward eventually forming a new national communist party, modeled along the Leninist principle that a vanguard organization of cadres would cultivate the growth of working-class consciousness and popular mobilization.⁴ These groups held a vague conception that a viable socialist movement would not grow spontaneously from the multitude of small, local-based struggles. They believed that one important step toward a national revolutionary movement would be for like-minded groups to share their local experiences and to seek ways to coordinate

² Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left Radical Activism in Southern California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), explores radical politics based on differential experiences with racism as well as the similarities and interethnic relations of the Black Panther Party, El Centro de Acción Social y Autónomo (CASA), and East Wind in Los Angeles; Ernesto Chávez, *¡Mi Raza Primero! (My People First!): Nationalism, Identity, and Insurgency the Chicano Movement in Los Angeles, 1966-1978* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), examines nationalism and class in the identity of the Brown Berets, the Chicano Moratorium Committee, La Raza Unida, and El Centro de Acción Social y Autónomo (CASA) in Los Angeles; for accounts of Black activism in the period other than the Black Panthers Party, see the Detroit Revolutionary Movements Collection, 1968-1976 at the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

³ The Communist Party of the United States of America Records: Chile Solidarity Collection 1963-1979, at the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, contains documentation on the National Coordinating Center in Solidarity with Chile. Other solidarity networks included Non-Intervention in Chile (NICH), the Puerto Rico Solidarity Committee, the Nicaragua Solidarity Network, and the Committee in Support of the People of El Salvador (CISPES).

⁴ The concept of the vanguard party, as found in Lenin's *What Is To Be Done*, is discussed in the literature review section of this chapter.

activism. These groups became known among radical activists of the period as the “party-building trend” (Elbaum 2002, 240-42). One of the participants was El Comité-MINP, a Puerto Rican organization from New York City.

Among Puerto Ricans in the United States, the radical tradition over the past forty years is evident in the many essays, articles, poems, speeches, music, and personal accounts of activists (González 2000; Melendez 2003; Torres & Velázquez, eds. 1998). Radical activism has been a constant force, expressed through support for the independence of Puerto Rico and freedom for Puerto Rican political prisoners, in the movement to rid the Puerto Rican island of Vieques of U.S. naval occupation, in community and workplace reform struggles, and in other progressive movements in the United States. Yet, with only a few exceptions,⁵ studies of Puerto Rican politics and social movements have not examined the emergence and impact of radical Puerto Rican activism in the United States. Scholars have noted this gap: “[The Puerto Rican organizations of the Left] have not left a clear record of what they accomplished or the impact they had” on Puerto Ricans in the United States, on their own lives, on other oppressed groups, and on the North American left (Rodríguez-Morazzani 1998, 25).

Two factors may account for the limited scholarly treatment of the Puerto Rican Left. First are the misconceptions that the Puerto Rican Left, as represented by the Puerto Rican Socialist Party and the Young Lords, was interested almost exclusively in building

⁵ For an accounting of the literature up to 1980 on radical activism of Puerto Ricans, see Angelo Falcón, “Bibliographic Essay: An Introduction to the Literature of Puerto Rican Politics in Urban America,” in *Puerto Rican Politics in Urban America*, eds. James Jennings and Monte Rivera (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984), 145-154. Other studies include Matthew Gandy, “Between Borinquen and the Barrio: Environmental Justice and New York City’s Puerto Rican Community, 1969-1972,” *Antipode* vol. 34, issue 4 (September 2002): 730-761; Cathy Schneider, “Framing Puerto Rican Identity: Political Opportunity Structures and Neighborhood Organizing in New York City,” *Mobilization: An International Journal* vol. 2, issue 2 (1997): 227-245; José Ramón Sánchez, *Boricua Power* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); and Andrés Torres and José E. Velázquez, eds., *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

support for the independence movement in Puerto Rico and that this political nationalism did not correspond to the economic and social interests of the Puerto Rican diaspora (Aronowitz 1996, 102-104; Cruz 1998). No doubt the Puerto Rican Left supported independence. But the nationalist characterization portrays only part of its objectives while neglecting to consider its wide-ranging participation in local protest movements. Also, analyses that treat the U.S. Left as a homogenous group (with the exception, perhaps, of the Black Panther Party) without considering the community- and workplace-based politics of national minorities are partial as well. For example, Buhle's (1987) claim that the radical organizations of the 1970s did not try to organize within the working class misses this experience.

Second, recent studies of urban protest movements have tended to attribute the influence of the Puerto Rican Left mainly to the activism of the Young Lords of 1969 to 1972 (Gandy 2003; Schneider 1997). Sánchez credits the Young Lords as the main group in the period to actualize a power potential through “mediated politics,” meaning that the Lords grasped the effectiveness of militant tactics designed to gain media attention (2007, 207-08). These analyses are not without merit. Though in existence for less than three years before part of the group changed to the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers' Organization (PRRWO), the Young Lords' confrontational tactics in New York City garnered extensive popular and media attention and, based on many accounts, inspired other Puerto Ricans to become politically active.⁶ Bearing in mind the Young Lords' influence, the decade-long attempts by other Puerto Rican radical organizations in the

⁶ Besides the accounts in Torres & Velázquez, eds. (1998), evidence of the Young Lords' motivational influence is provided in Chapters 2 and 3.

1970s to fight workplace, housing, health care, and education discrimination and to contribute to a more radical social change agenda should also be explored.

Aims of Study

The goal of this study is to analyze the interaction of national identity, racial discrimination, and class, and to understand the impact of an evolving political consciousness in the protest politics of one of the main organizations of the Puerto Rican Left in New York City, El Comité-MINP. El Comité formed in 1970 as a community action group on Manhattan's West Side. Over the course of several years, it transformed into a self-defined, Marxist-Leninist cadre organization, changing its name in 1975 to El Comité-MINP.⁷ From 1970 until its disintegration in 1984, EC-MINP engaged in two levels of political action. On one level, it initiated or joined local campaigns to expand or protect democratic rights – understood as access to jobs, housing, education, and health care – and worked with other progressive and revolutionary groups in national coalitions and international solidarity movements. On the second level, as a Marxist-Leninist organization, it became more involved in political education projects, in a national network of organizations interested in forming a new communist party in the United States, and in other forms of dialogue within the U.S. Left. This dissertation examines the role of political and ideological processes in the mobilizing experiences of EC-MINP, in relation to both levels of its program, as it evolved from community group to revolutionary organization and then eventually declined.

⁷ *El Comité* translates as “The Committee;” MINP stands for *Movimiento de Izquierda Nacional Puertorriqueño*, which translates as “Puerto Rican National Left Movement.” For ease of reading, I use EC and EC-MINP interchangeably with El Comité-MINP in this chapter. To reflect the corresponding phases of the group, I frequently use “EC” in Chapters 2 and 3 and “EC-MINP” or “MINP” in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Research Questions

In the course of my research, I asked the following questions: What conditions of nationality, race, and class gave rise to a visible, militant Puerto Rican Left that associated itself with the movement for socialism in the United States? How was the organization's trajectory shaped by internal political and ideological processes and by external experience? To what extent were communities receptive to EC's politics in the different phases? What conditions changed (if any) in and beyond Puerto Rican communities as a result of this activism? What objectives were not achieved and why? To what extent, and how, were local outcomes constrained by conditions of class and race in the United States?

To answer these questions, I had to first identify radicalizing factors in activists' experience. The difficulties of doing this were two-fold. First, the factors that shape political awareness and choices are both objective and subjective. As we know, similar social conditions such as family background, education, income, culture, and ethnicity do not in themselves necessarily produce an association with one or another political perspective. Middle-class youth who participated in political protest in the 1960s are widely regarded as having rejected the consumerist values and political assumptions and affiliations of their parents (Flacks 1988). Sometimes, especially for those who embrace a marginalized radical politics, an event such as a rent strike or a chance encounter with a powerful speaker may trigger connections between one's life circumstances and political power. Second, in the case of Puerto Ricans in New York, the experience of migration from a colonized country produced an inclination toward two different and persuasive Left tendencies – one primarily concerned with the struggle for independence in Puerto

Rico and the other concerned mainly with conditions of Puerto Ricans in the United States. Each tendency generated particular strategies and goals for political action.⁸

In attempting to find the elements that persuaded El Comité's members to embrace a complex political identity based on national origin, race, and class, a variety of influences were considered in lengthy discussions with former members. From there, my objectives were to understand the role activists played in local struggles; the alliances created; and how (or whether) successful outcomes were institutionalized. It was also important to understand how the organization evolved and changed – in composition, structure, and ideology – and to establish the links between these processes and political strategies, popular receptiveness to the politics, and the organization's decline.

Principal Findings

Based on qualitative interviews of former members and participant observation of EC's activism and internal processes, the key findings of my study are elaborated throughout the dissertation. First, the grassroots campaigns that grew directly out of people's experiences with racial and ethnic discrimination and class subordination, in which opponents and objectives were identifiable and allies were sought, and in which participants had a sense of leverage or political efficacy, resonated in targeted populations and achieved a measure of success. Relying on a generic "anti-system" message that integrated the politics of class and racial/ethnic identity, EC used specific mobilizing frames, and identified targets, tactics, and potential allies, that varied based on differences in the opportunities and constraints particular to each movement. However, although the organization's strategies in specific mobilizing campaigns produced positive results, the opportunities for achieving the objectives of protests declined in the second

⁸ The tendencies are elaborated in the next section and again in Chapter 3.

half of the 1970s as compared to the first half. In the mid- to late-1970s, local fiscal crisis, economic recession, and the rise of conservative ideology, along with the organization's inability to adapt its structure and strategies to the changing political environment, produced fewer opportunities for successful outcomes and contributed to EC-MINP's decline.

Concerning the role of identity and ideas, while pre-existing shared identity was an important component of mobilization, *political identity* was constructed through political action and ideological processes. The internal evolution of political consciousness and ideological perspectives in EC-MINP affected not only how it participated in social reform movements but also its strategic vision of social change. Theoretical development was a critical aspect of the organization's increasing ability to analyze power relations in the United States and to challenge the dominant ideology that blamed poor people for their political and economic conditions. The cadre formation, based on strict adherence to democratic centralism, was a logical outgrowth of the influences of prior and co-existing revolutionary movements and of the repression to which Puerto Rican and other Left activists were subjected in the period. Although the organization never swayed from the position that grassroots activism was its primary focus, as it became more immersed in the party-building project of the broader Marxist-Leninist Left, it became distanced from the issues and movements that resonated in local communities and workplaces. The inflexibility of the cadre structure eventually could not accommodate or resolve political differences and internal tensions deriving from conflicting programmatic visions, and contributed to EC-MINP's eventual demise.

Overall, my study shows that the experiences of class subordination and ethnic and racial discrimination influence political protest by discrediting elite perspective and dominant explanations for conditions of subordination. It shows, also, that the knowledge and ideas acquired through protest and political education have a transformational impact on the political identities, objectives and strategies of an activist organization. El Comité was formed by a group of softball players who spontaneously joined a contentious housing movement in the Upper West Side of Manhattan in 1970. Most of the initial dozen young men came from working class families and had no formal higher education. When various objective and subjective factors coalesced to inspire political action, the actors began to share and interpret their experiences among themselves, with other neighborhood activists, intellectuals, and revolutionaries, propelling them onto a path of further activism, study, and further radicalization. The ongoing transformations in political consciousness and identity were manifested in a changing program, generating new political experiences and further transformation.

Rise and Decline of El Comité-MINP

Specifically, the early members of El Comité were deeply influenced by the interaction of race, national identity, and class, as experienced by Puerto Ricans living in New York in 1970. When tenants on Manhattan's West Side squatted in buildings earmarked for demolition, EC helped to frame the movement as a struggle of "the people," meaning the poor, against the city's "urban removal" plan. The West Side's liberal tradition and a progressive network of advocates provided the opportunity to form alliances not only against private developers and city agencies but also against a vocal group of homeowners and newer residents that supported urban renewal. The contentious

repertoires of the housing movement, influenced by the prior actions of the Young Lords in East Harlem, included forceful takeovers of public and private housing, traffic blocking, and street rallies.

EC grew in membership and became radicalized through the housing movement, embracing Puerto Rican nationalism as well as a “Latino” political identity, understood in ethnic studies as a situational identity “based on the premise that particular circumstances and social conditions determine when this type of group identity and consciousness is appropriate for social action and mobilization” (Padilla 1995, 439). This identity was rooted in the shared experience of poverty and discrimination, cultural ties, as well as an “anti-imperialist” affinity among Latin Americans. When housing compromises were reached and further protest was subdued in the early 1970s, the group formed alliances to fight for education and workers’ rights, while simultaneously supporting Puerto Rican independence and international democratization movements. With allies from diverse sectors, it won a campaign that brought bilingual education to District 3 in the West Side. Unemployed construction workers in EC joined Black workers to demand affirmative action hiring at public project sites. For two years, the coalition blamed the city and closed unions for minority exclusion and still tried to gain allies, mostly without success, among White ethnic workers. It did, however, get more jobs for minority workers.

In the second half of the 1970s, other campaigns, at SUNY Old Westbury and Metropolitan Hospital in East Harlem, were also framed as democratic rights’ struggles. The first provided an opportunity for a multi-ethnic student movement to preserve what was viewed as a progressive admissions policy. The second, occurring in the midst of New York City’s mid-1970s fiscal crisis, blamed the alliance between the corporate

financial sector and city government for a plan to close Metropolitan Hospital and for disproportionately impacting working class minorities with budget cuts. Students claimed a victory at Old Westbury; and the city reversed its position and kept Metropolitan Hospital open.

The gains of these movements were limited; and other campaigns achieved no positive policy outcome. But in the mid-1970s, EC was important not only because it coordinated actions and mobilized resources but, more significantly, because it helped to provide the perspective and analytical frames that challenged elite policies as well as the dominant explanations for conditions in communities and workplaces where Puerto Ricans, other minorities, and other poor people lived and worked. The “anti-system” framing of local struggles was effective, as scholars have noted about successful social movements (Benford and Snow 2000; Tarrow 1998), especially in environments where distrust of elites and cynicism toward mainstream political leaders was the norm. Coming on the heels of the civil rights’ gains of the 1960s, democratic rights’ struggles in the early 1970s were effective in putting elites on the defensive against claims of discrimination and attracting mainstream allies concerned about inequality and social and environmental injustice. However, local and national structural changes – particularly economic recession and restructuring, and the conservative ideological and political backlash – reduced opportunities for effective protest.

With the transformation into a Marxist-Leninist organization (discussed in Chapter 3), EC-MINP began to view local reform struggles as opportunities for advocating socialist revolution. The cadre organization, in contrast to the community group, gradually changed its approaches to recruitment, structure, and political action. It

invited selected individuals to join. As the organization grew numerically, and based on Leninist principles and the models of cadre organizations of Latin America,⁹ democratic centralism structured the communication between members' units and leadership bodies.¹⁰ Members discussed the progress of political campaigns and protests in local chapters, which was shared with the organization through the leadership bodies. The leadership bodies established the curriculum for political study and assigned tasks to chapter members. The more ideologically committed it became, the more concerned EC-MINP became about debating positions on a multitude of issues within the Puerto Rican and U.S. Left. Based on the concern shared with like-minded organizations over the lack of a unified national Left, increased emphasis was placed on dialoguing with other groups in the U.S. interested in building a new communist party.

The impact of these changes was to split the organization's focus between grassroots activism and integration into networks of the Left. EC-MINP responded to expectations within that venue to develop positions on a wide range of issues, from local busing in Boston to Zimbabwe's independence movement.¹¹ It sent representatives to coalitions commemorating May Day and International Women's Day and supporting various international movements. This level of activism required the development of a more sophisticated propaganda machine and drained resources from local movements. The organization's structure gradually became more bureaucratized by adding units and

⁹Besides Lenin's *What Is To Be Done*, the models included the typical communist party structures and the principles of cadre formation discussed by Chile's Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR), in *Notes on Cadre Formation* (Resistance Publications 1974).

¹⁰ Democratic centralism is more fully discussed in Chapter 3.

¹¹See, for example, "Busing In Boston" and "Elections in Zimbabwe: Courting Imperialism's Favor," in *Obreros en Marcha*, February 1976, Vol. 1, No. 14; and May 1979, Vol. IV, No. 3, respectively. Throughout the dissertation, I refer to newspapers, speeches, internal documents, and pamphlets of El Comité-MINP, and other related materials, contained in my personal archive to be donated to CUNY's Center for Puerto Rican Studies after the deposit of the dissertation. When referencing these materials, I use the acronym "PATBDC."

rules for reporting to leadership bodies and between units, which stifled internal communication.

The multiple endeavors of EC-MINP in its later years created an entirely different set of experiences and generated priorities different from those of its early years. Theoretical study was immensely important in developing the analytical skills of participants; members acquired significant experience in public speaking, negotiating, and writing. But the organization as an entity began to interact less with the population it sought to mobilize than with those already mobilized. When the organization became immersed in “party-building” debates and revolutionary rhetoric without having first achieved substantial popular support for the communist party-building approach, it became increasingly isolated from its immediate base and irrelevant to the communities where it originated. The concern in the organization for pursuing the “correct” path to revolution also eventually sparked discussions about whether a variety of political activities at the local level advanced or hindered the long-term goal. When internal differences developed over divergent approaches to political action, the democratic centralist structure could not accommodate the rift; and the organization disintegrated.

Thus, my case study proceeds at two levels of analysis: on one level, I examine the interaction of race, class, and national identity in shaping the politics of resistance of EC-MINP, while bearing in mind changes in structural opportunities and constraints during the decade of the 1970s. The second level is aimed at understanding the construction of identity and ideology, as it evolved in the process of political struggle and education and influenced the organization’s rise, its political program, and its eventual demise.

Political Protest, Minority Mobilization, and the Emergence of El Comité

Political activism was not lacking in Puerto Rican communities prior to the 1960s. Since the first large wave of migration from Puerto Rico to New York in the early 1920s, Puerto Ricans were involved in workplace and community organizing as well as in efforts to support the liberation of Puerto Rico from U.S. colonial occupation (Cruz 1998; Haslip-Viera 1996; Iglesias 1977; Rodríguez and Sánchez Korrol, eds. 1996; Sánchez 2007; Sánchez Korrol 1994). In the decade following the “Great Migration” of 1940 to 1964 during which nearly one-third of Puerto Rico’s population left for the United States, Puerto Rican participation in radical, socialist-oriented political organizations grew in numbers and influence. These organizations, especially in New York City and Chicago, gained visibility and respect in their neighborhoods.¹² Some among the Puerto Rican left were students or intellectuals. Others were workers – employed and unemployed – whose particular experiences as first- or second-generation immigrants from a U.S. colony, as national “racial” minorities and low-paid, underemployed workers led them to question the dominant pluralist beliefs about U.S. society.¹³

But Puerto Ricans were not politically homogenous or united in a radical political orientation. In New York City, by 1970 several individuals had achieved prominence through local Democratic Party clubs or leadership positions in anti-poverty programs, especially in the South Bronx; and Herman Badillo had just been elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from the Bronx. This is not to say that the Democratic Party in

¹² In his 1977 study of Puerto Rican political leadership in New York, Jennings acknowledges his choice *not* to analyze the role of “ideological leaders” on the Left who did not use “administrative or electoral channels” to address the predominant needs of Puerto Rican communities. James Jennings, *Puerto Rican Politics in New York City*. (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1977): 5-7.

¹³ Beginning in 1960, Puerto Ricans were counted in the U.S. Census Bureau decennial census as a category of “race,” separate from whites and blacks.

New York enthusiastically recruited Puerto Rican members. As Bayer (1984) points out, for at least two decades following World War II, the Democratic Party basically ignored Puerto Ricans. Further, indicators such as voter registration rolls and turnout suggest many “stateside” Puerto Ricans remained outside formal institutional political processes.¹⁴

Notwithstanding low institutional participation, protest politics was on the rise in New York City’s Puerto Rican communities in 1970. The resurgence of a U.S.-based support movement for independence of Puerto Rico was a key factor of political socialization in the 1970s for the civil rights and “Black Power” generation in Puerto Rican communities. The Movimiento Pro-Independencia (MPI), founded in Puerto Rico in 1959, established its New York-based U.S. branch in the 1960s with the purpose of building popular support for the anti-colonial struggle and recruiting new members. MPI, which changed its name to the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP) in 1971, held public meetings and distributed information about the history of resistance to the U.S. occupation of the island (Interviews of Federico Lora, 6/18/04; Carmen Martell 6/18/04; Frank Vergara, 9/3/04). From 1969 to 1971, the Young Lords, while proclaiming the liberation of Puerto Rico as its primary goal, staged highly visible actions in the streets of East Harlem to protest education, housing, and sanitation conditions.¹⁵ Around the same time, El Comité emerged from the housing movement on Manhattan’s West Side to

¹⁴ Angelo Falcón, *Atlas of Stateside Puerto Ricans*. (Washington, D.C.: Puerto Rico Federal Affairs, Administration, 2004) contrasts the relatively low voter registration and turnout among Puerto Ricans in the United States with the high rate of electoral participation in Puerto Rico. See also, *Voter Registration and Turnout in Federal Elections by Race/Ethnicity 1972-1996* in “Current Population Reports, Series P20, U.S. Bureau of Census, indicating that “Hispanic” voter registration ranges between thirty and forty percent and turnout between twenty and thirty percent of voting age population.

¹⁵The first Young Lords’ Organization originated in Chicago in 1966. The New York Young Lords’ Party formed in 1969 and, after a split in 1971, part of the group formed the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization (PRRWO).

become one of the three principal organizations of the Puerto Rican Left in New York (Elbaum 2002; Torres and Velázquez, eds. 1998).

Though they collaborated on many issues, the Puerto Rican Left organizations held distinct perspectives on political action. One saw itself as an extension of Puerto Rico's independence and socialist movement and believed that Puerto Ricans in the United States, as "forced residents," should struggle primarily for the liberation of Puerto Rico.¹⁶ The other tendency identified its main objective as contributing to a socialist movement in the United States. The latter view was based on the premise that Puerto Ricans in the U.S. comprised a national minority within a multinational population and therefore should focus primarily on improving conditions in their workplaces and communities and on building a multi-ethnic movement for socialism.¹⁷

EC defined its primary goal as participating in struggles for reforms and for socialism in the U.S. (as did the part of the Young Lords that became PRRWO). The members believed that Puerto Rican migrants had become increasingly incorporated into the socioeconomic structure of the U.S. and, therefore, part of a multinational working class. In many instances, the differences between the official positions of these organizations was academic in that members from all three cooperated in local campaigns as well as in pro-independence coalitions. At times, the differences elaborated through public documents of the groups and in debate forums heightened tensions and obstructed cooperation, temporarily. Distinguishing between tendencies is relevant to my study only insofar as it points to the need for caution in generalizing about "Puerto Rican

¹⁶ Puerto Rican Socialist Party, *Political Thesis of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party: The Socialist Alternative*. New York: North American Congress on Latin America, Inc., 1975.

¹⁷ El Comité-MINP, *Process of Puerto Rican Migration; Puerto Ricans and Proletarian Internationalism*, pamphlet printed and distributed in 1975. PATBDC; also available online through Bolerium Books.

radicalism” through the experience of one organization or one objective. This study, therefore, is a partial account of the Puerto Rican Left, confined mainly to the experience of El Comité-MINP, except for sections which recall the collaborative ventures of these organizations.

EC can also be contrasted with groups organized solely around ethnic identity for political incorporation. Cruz describes the Puerto Rican Political Action Committee of Connecticut as using identity politics as a means “to channel energy created by bonds of identity into pursuit of political enfranchisement” (1998, xi). In contrast, as Epstein (1997) points out about many of the U.S. Left organizations of the period, EC-MINP shared the view that electoral politics did not provide a viable path to meaningful reform or revolution (Epstein 1997). Ethnic identity was an important aspect of mobilizing strategies in protesting ethnic and racial discrimination and colonialism in Puerto Rico, but EC-MINP’s broader objective was to recruit Puerto Ricans for the long-term revolutionary project as much as it was to attain specific anti-racist policy outcomes.

“Identity” rooted in the experience of racism created for El Comité an affinity – not competition – with other minorities, including other Latin Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans. EC’s earliest confrontations in housing and education struggles showed that local political elites of the same ethnicity did not necessarily represent the interests of the majority of poor and working people. The racialized class experience contradicted the claims of openness and inclusion of the “pluralist heaven.” Even if sincere individuals found their way to positions of leadership in state institutions, real economic power was largely unquestioned in mainstream institutions. Increased ethnic representation may soften the blows against minority

communities or augment the funding for anti-poverty groups. But the capacity to resist oppression and to exercise control and choice in fundamental ways would not improve through ethnic-based, competitive institutional politics. The proximity of the Upper West Side to Harlem facilitated communication between activists in both areas, and EC joined with African Americans to protest against police brutality and for minority access to jobs at construction sites. In local housing, education, and health care struggles, the demands for “democratic rights” attacked injustice where it was most vulnerable and often entailed pursuing relationships with several minority groups as well as with like-minded Whites.

These local priorities did not mean EC was detached from the nationalist cause of liberation for Puerto Rico. Many of its thirty or forty early members had relatives in Puerto Rico and visited the island regularly. As the organization assumed a nationalist identity, it developed close associations not only with the U.S. Chapter of the PSP and the Young Lords in New York but also with pro-independence and socialist organizations and progressive trade unions in Puerto Rico.¹⁸ EC believed its accumulated knowledge of Puerto Rico’s colonial dilemma ascribed to it (and to other Puerto Rican organizations) the responsibility of educating North Americans and building support for independence. In addition to the anti-Vietnam War movement, the U.S. Left in the 1970s and early 1980s supported popular resistance movements in many parts of the world (especially those in Latin America and Africa), and EC joined these efforts.¹⁹ Therefore, El Comité

¹⁸Nationalism and Puerto Rico solidarity is discussed in Chapters 2 and 4.

¹⁹ For an account of anti-apartheid solidarity, see Donald R. Culverson, *Contesting Apartheid: U.S. Activism, 1960-1987* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999); on Central American solidarity extending into the 1980s, see Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); and Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Convictions of the Soul: Religion, Culture, and Agency in the Central America Solidarity Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). In the 1970s, the bimonthly *Report on the Americas* of the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA) frequently chronicled the activities of U.S. solidarity movements as did the independent Marxist newspaper, the *Guardian*.

established for itself two related objectives. The first was to be involved in local struggles and to build a base of support for the eventual formation of a multinational communist party. The second was to promote – in the jargon of the period – “international proletarian solidarity” by supporting anti-imperialist and democratic movements of other nations. The phrase has an obvious connection to Marx and Lenin and therefore today carries the connotation of idealist grandiosity. However, its meaning was not significantly different from more contemporary terms such as “cross-border organizing” and “global justice movement” used by labor organizers and human rights and environmental activists, signifying the belief that an effective strategy for global democratization includes the creation of international networks and alliances (Armbruster-Sandoval 2005; Brecher and Costello 1991; Della Porta, ed. 2007; Tabb 2001).

Though it retained its focus on organizing in Puerto Rican communities, MINP’s membership gradually became, in small degree, more diverse. Several Latin Americans (other than Puerto Ricans) were among the original or early members. One founder was Dominican; several other early members were of Mexican, Colombian, and Cuban origins; two Whites joined in the early 1970s and several more in the mid-1970s. The majority of the membership lived in predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhoods and identified with the struggles of those communities. In the late 1970s, MINP recruited more widely from the North American Left.²⁰ One of the internal tensions emerging in the leadership body toward the end of the decade involved differences on the question of what types of reform movements in which a revolutionary organization should be

²⁰ I asked several interviewees why there were few, if any, Blacks in the organization. I was told there were, from time to time, African American affiliates but that other progressive organizations such as Harlem FightBack focused on organizing in African American communities.

involved. This tension added to the factors that made this case interesting for examining how ideology, class, and ethnic experiences affect political strategies and outcomes.

Theoretical Context and Literature Review

Definitions of Concepts and Terms

Tilly defines social movements generically as “sustained challenge(s) to power holders in the name of a population living under the jurisdiction of...[those] power holders by means of repeated public displays of that population’s worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment” (1999, 257). Similarly, Tarrow emphasizes continuous interaction between challengers and elites, opponents, and authorities “based on common purposes and social solidarities” (1998, 4). I frequently use the terms “episodes” or “campaigns” in this study, recognizing the contentious politics of activists often did not last long enough to be characterized as sustained or prolonged and that, especially in local struggles, contentious repertoires did not necessarily create new opportunities for “widening cycles of contention” (Tarrow 1998, 19). However, as discussed in the next section of this literature review, I use the “synthesis” framework for social movement analysis discussed by McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001) to interpret the contentious politics in this study.

The term “radical” describes activists and organizations (in the context of the 1970s) who embraced the Marxist critique that fundamental differences between the working class majority and the ruling class minority were “irreconcilable” in capitalist society. The radical Left refers to those who believed that deep transformations in power relations must occur in order to achieve a more egalitarian control over and distribution of wealth. Radicals obviously had very different perspectives on how those

transformations might occur. The Leninist strand, in particular, was influenced by the notion of “revolutionary agency.” Though Lenin rejected the idea that socialism could evolve through the “machinery of capitalist democracy” [i.e. elections and legislative reform], he also viewed communist integration into labor unions and parliamentary processes as tactical questions (Lenin, *State and Revolution* and *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*). The Leninist underpinning of the cadre-type formation of “Marxist-Leninist” organizations of the 1970s was based in the claim that, through their trade unions, workers could be expected only to develop “trade union consciousness.” Therefore, theoretically informed and committed party members had to bring revolutionary consciousness to the workers, understanding the risk to their lives in doing so (Lenin, *What is to be Done*).

Political Opportunities, Activists, and Mobilizing Frames in Social Movements

A number of social movement scholars have emphasized the utility of integrating the analysis of changes in the structure of political opportunities with the study of the conscious role activists play in building momentum for sustained contentious actions (McAdam, Tilly and Tarrow 2001; Meyer 2002; Tarrow 1998). The synthesis approach I use in this study provides insights into the origins of El Comité, as well as the timing, framing, targets, and outcomes of the protest movements in which it participated.

In seeking to identify factors that facilitate or inhibit social movements, resource mobilization theory of the 1970s and 1980s emphasized the role of strong organizations in coordinating collective political action and accumulating resources to which political “outsiders” may not otherwise have access (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Empirical studies focused on demonstrating the role of the strong organization in social movements in

harnessing and directing available external resources (human and financial) to promote and sustain the cause as well as the role of external organizations or strong countermovements in using resources to destroy the challengers. (Cuzán 1990; Marx 1999) In contrast to earlier theories characterizing protest as collective pathology or inevitable response to grievous conditions, resource mobilization theory contributed to the understanding of collective protest as purposive political behavior.

McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001, 15) point out that resource mobilization theory is partial, at best, in that it focuses almost entirely on organizational strategies and misses the interactive, contingent character of social movements. Piven and Cloward (1979) argue also that formal organizations may have a moderating effect on disruptive actions of social movements because they tend to seek legitimacy from external actors on whose resources they depend.²¹ As noted by Tilly (1999, 256), social movements are not necessarily solidaristic, coherent groups but are defined by interactions between multiple and changing actors.

Focusing on when social movements emerge as coordinated, disruptive, and sustained challenges to elites, Tarrow (1998) points to the dynamic of political opportunity structures in cycles of protest, including changes in ruling alignments, new openings for political participation such as electoral opportunities, the availability of influential allies, and intra-elite conflicts. Movements create opportunities for themselves, as well, by seeking political allies and framing grievances in ways that resonate with the population they seek to mobilize (Benford and Snow; Tarrow 1998; Tilly 1999). How

²¹ In a countervailing argument to one that posits the moderating effect of organizational resource (human and financial) dependency, Everingham's study of the Nicaraguan revolution, *Revolution and the Multi-Class Coalition in Nicaragua* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), suggests that a multi-class alliance, in which economic elites gave political and financial support to the Sandinista National Liberation Front, was critical in defeating the Somoza regime.

activists interpret and articulate grievances, identify targets and potential allies, communicate objectives and plans for direct action, and demonstrate their worthiness will affect the paths of social movements. The identities that exist or are constructed based on shared interpretations of grievances (as distinct from communicating an ideologically standpoint) are additional components of political opportunity structures which produce effective mobilizing frames.

However, Koopsman (2005) points out that the correspondence between changes in political opportunity structures and movement building is not consistently evident in empirical studies. Activists do not necessarily recognize opportunity nor does a strong, informed movement automatically dissipate in tandem with changing opportunities. Furthermore, shared purpose and identities are complex constructions which do not develop mechanically automatically from shared conditions or preconditions. Greater focus on the evolution of movements over time in historically specific circumstances may provide better insights into the structure-agency relationship and why and when movement participants act. (Koopsman 2005; Starn 1992)

In attempting to redress the structuralist bias of explaining social movement momentum as reactions to objective changes in political opportunities and threats, McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001) emphasize that, in order to motivate collective action, conscious and, often, seasoned activists must be able to attribute an opportunity for social change to a movement's potential based on a power interdependency. For example, civil rights' activists in the South seized upon the bus boycott as an effective strategy attributable to the potential economic clout of Montgomery's black population. (46)

Thus, the potential success of conscious efforts to build networks of solidarity is

contingent upon a combination of opportunity, shared identity, and a sense of political efficacy. Similarly, Piven (2006) and Piven and Cloward (1998) propose that, in order for potentially disruptive power to be mobilized, subordinate groups must first recognize their power interdependence, overcome constraints (sometimes cultural or religious), and coordinate collective action. How these conditions are met is what Piven (2006) calls the classical problem of solidarity.

Intersection of Class, Race, and National Identity in Political Mobilization

One of the main theoretical concerns of this study is how subordinate groups interpret and respond to oppressive conditions that are based in relations of class, race, and national origin. No doubt, “inherited” shared identities and relationships of trust based on variables such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, familial ties, or even class position generally facilitate communication and raise the potential for collective mobilization and may help to explain why nationalist or ethnic-based movements tend to be successful (Tilly 2004; Tarrow 1998). Squatters and their supporters on Manhattan’s West Side in 1970 were mainly (but not entirely) low-income minorities, who knocked on the doors of their neighbors and called family and friends to rallies. Still, mobilization for the purpose of resistance, with its attendant risks, requires a shared perspective on the nature of the grievances and what to do about them.

Drawing on Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) thesis that everyday knowledge of shared conditions by a group interacts with the specialized knowledge of experts to produce a second level of knowledge, Collins suggests that Black feminist thought rearticulates a consciousness that already exists among African American women and “encourages collective identity by offering an alternative self-definition to the one

offered by the social order” (1989, 746). In a similar formulation, Therborn (1980) defines ideology as the set of ideas people hold that are drawn both from everyday life as well as from institutionalized and intellectual doctrines which inform social and political behavior. The rearticulation (or counterhegemonic ideology) becomes a potential tool of resistance to subordination. For subordinate groups with few resources and no control over the institutions that, as Herman and Chomsky (2002) say, manufacture consent, collective environments must exist – or be created – where “common sense” interpretations of reality can interact with specialized (expert, intellectual, ideological) interpretations to develop alternative perspectives on power relations and plans of action that challenge those relations. The community-based local struggles of national minorities in the 1970s constituted one environment which produced perspectives based on an intersection of class, racial, and ethnic experience.

The dynamic of the collective in the development of political identity in minority communities is particularly instructive for two reasons. First, shared conditions in the racial and ethnic hierarchy do not automatically generate the shared perspective I describe as a complex political identity. There are a number of potential perspectives that derive from the process of defining the opponent, identifying the population to be organized, and agreeing on strategies. The bifurcation in the civil rights movement of the 1960s among Blacks and between Black and White activists is a clear example of multiple potentials (McAdam 1988). Likewise, the different radical tendencies in Puerto Rican communities constitute another example of the creative, ideology-influenced construction of political identity.

Second, there is the tendency by a broad range of scholars to characterize in one way or other the political identity of “American workers” or “Americans” in general. Long before the resurgent popularity of the pluralist thesis that mobilization based on ethnic identity is an effective point of entry for U.S. political incorporation (Jones-Correa 1998), gradual assimilation was widely regarded as the typical process by which new immigrants entered into the mainstream of political, economic, and social life. However, the notion that European immigrant groups, one after the other, universally embraced the Protestant work ethic and American political values was an idealized version of U.S. labor history (Huntington 1981, 23-27). Gutman’s (1976) study of conflict between immigrant cultures and industrial capitalism in the late 19th century documents fierce battles waged by new immigrants against the exigencies of capitalist production.

The claim of a pluralistic, but unified “American” political identity among Whites and (to a lesser extent) Blacks may be somewhat more relevant to the period following the New Deal, from the 1930s through the 1960s, during which time large sectors of workers (mostly White) benefited from economic expansion and collective bargaining (Aronowitz 1992, 2003; Harrison and Bluestone 1990; Montgomery 1987). In the case of minority workers in the 1970s, who were unemployed in larger numbers than White workers, or employed mainly in low-wage, unorganized sectors with limited access to union jobs, marginalized in education and housing by poverty and/or racism, and faced with unresponsive political parties, shared conditions and collective discussion produced competing ideas about intersecting class and racial structures of power and corresponding forms of resistance.

Carmichael (later named Turé) and Hamilton (1967), for example, asserted that Blacks must organize themselves within their communities, and form independent political organizations, if they expected to improve their socioeconomic conditions and acquire political power in the United States. Blacks could not expect the White power structure to accede voluntarily to demands voiced by a few from an unorganized community, nor could well-intentioned White advocates secure significant reforms without Black self-organization. The essential aspect of the Black Power Movement was not, as Cruz (1998) suggests, that it considered race-based mobilization a precondition for political integration. Rather, its significance for national minorities was that it brought into focus the question of institutionalized racism in maintaining relations of domination and subordination. For Carmichael and Hamilton, the political party system in the U.S, designed to “manage conflict,” reinforces oppression because it is not interested in altering the imbalance of power in social structures and institutions (1967, 165).

The racial identity-based political organization urged by Black Nationalist ideology was integrated with a class analysis and clearly not intended for the purpose of joining, or converting, racist political parties or for sharing the spoils of social programs. The objective of independent, community-based organizing was to pursue Black control over the institutions in those communities. That meant parent control in schools, tenant control and ownership of housing, and consumer control over merchants. Independent political organization was understood as the first step not of incorporation but of confronting and then replacing existing structures with structures that would nurture self-determination by subordinate groups to overcome social, economic, and political oppression. The influence of this perspective, as well as the evolved thought of Malcolm

X (as discussed in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* first published in 1965), were evident in the Ten-Point Program of the Black Panther Party (Sales 1994).

Adding to the case for caution against structural bias, insofar as it may neglect the varied paths to shared purpose of a subordinate group, Starn (1992) points to the creativity of peasants protesting corruption and injustice in Northern Peru in the late twentieth century. Historical conditions were significant influences in the formation of the “rondas” (rural justice groups). But equally important to building peasant movement momentum was the construction and evolution of political identity:

“Campesinos came to associate the rondas with a new spirit of cooperation and autonomy. In some communities, rondas began not only to patrol and resolve disputes but also to take charge of small community public works projects.... No longer, as many peasants put it, were the rondas just cuidavacas (“cow protectors”). Instead, they were making a strong bid for greater campesino power over the working of their communities.” (100)

Starn attributes the movement’s success to the ability of the rondas to create a vision, pursue organizing strategies, and offer alternatives that resonated among the local population.

In her comparative study of Black, Chicano, and Japanese Left organizations in California in the 1970s, Pulido (2004; 2006) demonstrates the different ways in which race and class interacted for each group, producing specific and distinctive forms of resistance. She, too, emphasizes the historical context in which organizations of the third-world left developed:

“Though there is a long history of organizing by leftists of color (Garcia 1994; Kelley 1990; Yoneda 1983), the third-world left of the late 1960s and 1970s was perhaps its most consolidated expression. Inspired by anti-colonial revolutions, the US third-world left was an outgrowth of the black, Chicana/o Puerto Rican, American Indian, and Asian American power movements, all of which were antiracist and fairly

nationalist. As these movements evolved, however, a small number of activists desired a more materialist politics. Given their political histories, these activists were unwilling to privilege race or class, and they developed ideologies that reflected how the two intersected to create unique historical experiences. The insistence on addressing both race and class equally is a primary distinction between white and third-world left organizations. (2004, 764-765)

Reflecting particular forms of oppression, however, each group pursued distinct political programs. The Black Panther Party stressed community control and self-defense; CASA promoted labor organizing, immigration reform, and cultural identity; East Wind emphasized community service, gang intervention, solidarity work, and multi-national party-building (Pulido 2004; 2006).

A shared political identity as a property of protest politics, then, involves the collective recognition that oppressive power relations cannot be redressed through routine political processes. It requires the development of a perspective on the nature of the oppressive power relation, and the articulation of paths of resistance and alternative constructions that make sense to potential movement participants. In contemporary U.S. society, maintaining the hegemony of pluralist doctrine by suppressing and repressing countervailing ideas and alternatives is the ongoing project of dominant political, economic, and ideological institutions (Herman and Chomsky 2002; Collins 1989; Parenti 1995) In this light, the collective construction of political identity, through a dialectical exchange between experience and intellectual reflection and interpretation, in historically specific conditions, helps explain how countervailing ideas develop among subordinate groups and become articulated in corresponding forms of organization and resistance, as with El Comité.

Radicalism in Social Movements

A second important theoretical issue is how (or if) radicalization contributes to or detracts from movements for “democratization from below.” While the long-range goal of the radical organizations of the 1970s may have been fundamental social change, or proletarian revolution in the case of Marxist-Leninist groups, socialist and communist parties, unions, and labor movements in the U.S. and Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries took various political paths to pursue their interpretation of how to accomplish this goal, including legislative change, electoral campaigns, and participation in an array of social movements, some of which had fairly moderate goals (Aronowitz 1996; Lader 1979). As Aronowitz points out, social movements may be viewed as different modalities of class politics (2003, 141).

Miliband (1991) stresses the role that diverse and broad-based social movements can play in potentially achieving reforms that improve people’s lives, in escalating and strengthening dissent, and in demonstrating linkages between separate struggles. But scholars disagree on the efficacy of using disruptive tactics and setting radical objectives. In one view, radical movements are inherently unstable and subject to schism because the broad participation necessary for potentially successful movements invites a range of perspectives that ideologically driven movements do not accommodate. Also, with lofty goals, radicals are less likely to find the necessary balance between persuasive and threatening actions to lure mainstream actors and convert policymakers. The contrary view suggests that social movements that are least disruptive and most open to moderation and accommodation achieve the least in terms of effecting real change in power relations (Piven and Cloward 1979).

The idea that radical, disruptive movements for expanding democracy are less likely to obtain successful outcomes because they tend to be unyielding in their goals implies, on the one hand, that it is impractical and futile for subordinate groups to pursue real changes in power relations and, on the other hand, conveys an optimistic view of what less disruptive social movements can achieve through compromise. Disruptive tactics may invite repression and discourage broad-based alliances (Tarrow 1998). However, publicized repression may also evoke empathy and enhance the image of the movement in the public eye (Giugni 1999).

Another question that emerges from this empirical study concerns how a marginalized Left becomes obsessed with debating ideological nuances and insisting on ideological uniformity at the cost of neglecting the real processes of political and ideological work necessary for meaningful social change. There is ample evidence that organizations of the Left in the 1970s, including those of Puerto Ricans, suffered from sectarianism and a self-defeating demand of loyalty to particular brands of “truth” and demanded nothing less than consensus on “correct” political lines. Small groups sometimes splintered into smaller groups from in-fighting that pushed them toward irrelevance (Aronwitz 1996; Elbaum 2002; Velázquez 1998). The case of EC-MINP illustrates the dynamic. For at least the first part of its history, there was a clear unity between its community-based movement experience and its political perspective. But the collective environment of the Left generated a social and political life of its own, where individuals and organizations filled their agendas with mobilizations of like-minded individuals, especially in solidarity movements, and with debates over the path to revolution. For MINP, as well as for other organizations of the period, the consequences

of this collective Left dynamic was a political practice disconnected from grassroots influences.

Dissertation Plan

The chapters of this dissertation are presented, in the main, chronologically as stages in the formation, rise, and decline of El Comité-MINP.

Chapter 2 explores the factors that inspired a group of young, low-income Puerto Ricans to become active in contentious politics. I provide an overview of the colonial relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico, the island's independence movement, the experience of migration, the conditions Puerto Rican migrants to New York faced, and the local and national political environment, to indicate how class, race, and national identity influenced El Comité's early political involvement in the housing struggle known as "Operation Move-In." The strategies and tactics of the housing struggle, including disruptive actions, persuasive framing of grievances, and the building of broad coalitions and alliances, are analyzed as factors which contributed to partial, though short-lived, victory against the city and real estate developers. I then demonstrate that the "anti-system" perspective, affirmed through political action, together with the exposure to other activists and ideas, contributed to El Comité's embrace of Puerto Rican nationalism and its collaboration with other organizations of the Puerto Rican Left.

Chapter 3 traces El Comité's transition from community group to political organization from 1971 to 1975, revealing some of the formidable issues new entrants to political activism had to address, including the challenges of assimilating a new "morality," acquiring literacy and analytical skills, committing to the demands of political study and activism, and finding resources to sustain activism. I interpret these

internal processes, combined with theoretical studies, a reconsideration of the role of Puerto Ricans in political struggle in the U.S., and the organizational models of Latin American guerrilla movements and communist parties, as the main factors in El Comité's transformation to a Marxist-Leninist cadre organization. The chapter shows how the growth in political consciousness, combined with external political opportunities, shaped the framing of grievances in community and workplace activism as struggles for "democratic rights." Whereas the democratic rights' frame appealed to broad, multi-ethnic sectors in struggles for bilingual education and media inclusion of Latinos, it was less effective in the attempt to build multiethnic workers' unity in construction-site protests when scarce jobs were at stake and closed unions denied access to minorities.

Chapter 4 analyzes the impact of ideological transformation on El Comité's political program, specifically its duality of purpose as a Marxist-Leninist organization. During this period, the organization positioned itself as part of the U.S. revolutionary Left and entered the party-building debates with like-minded organizations. In the period covered, 1975-1980, political opportunities for successful protest outcomes declined as New York City government responded to a severe budget crisis with cutbacks targeting municipal employees and basic health care and education programs, and conservative ideology ascended in the nation. The chapter examines the student movement at SUNY Old Westbury, where EC members helped organize two strikes by a demographically diverse student population, with faculty support, to preserve the college's commitment to provide broad access to a Latino, Black, and white working class population. In contrast, the struggle against health care cuts in East Harlem targeted political and financial sector elites for the disproportionate burden of fiscal crisis placed upon low-income minorities.

The Chapter also includes the experience of the Latin Women's Collective to illustrate the particular emphasis EC placed on encouraging women to become politically active.

The anti-colonial frame used by core activists in two movements related to Puerto Rico, to free nationalist prisoners and to obtain a United Nations' consensus acknowledging Puerto Rico's Colonial status, was less effective than democratic rights' frames in mobilizing popular support. The ultimately successful movement to free the nationalists after 25 years of imprisonment galvanized broad-based support on the humanitarian ground that the life sentences were overly harsh and unfair. The campaigns seeking resolutions of the U.N. Decolonization Committee urging the United States to recognize Puerto Rico's right to self-determination drew support primarily from Left solidarity networks.

Finally, the chapter begins to interpret the impact of internal processes and ideological transformation on EC's practical politics, policy pursuits, and linkages to local communities. Though EC continued to be active in movements and grassroots political projects, the split of resources and energy into multiple tasks and the emphasis on elusive goals effectively distanced EC-MINP from its community roots.

In Chapter 5, I address the internal dilemmas in EC-MINP generated by ideological and political tensions, the bureaucratized structure, the rejection of electoral politics, and other tensions that emerged stemming from changes in the organization's composition in its last years. The organization included more Whites recruited from solidarity movements than in the early years, and more students. Though some of the founders were members and belonged to leading bodies until the organization's demise, others had left for Puerto Rico. There were fewer workers, as well. The Chapter

explains the split in the organization that occurred in 1981 as a product of the democratic centralist structure and intransigence of ideology that could not accommodate political differences and debate.

I conclude the Chapter by discussing the revitalized campaign of the 1990s to remove the U.S. Navy from Vieques, in which former members of EC and other organizations of the Puerto Rican Left of the 1970s participated. The “rights”-based, inclusive mobilizing frames utilized by the revitalized Vieques Support network, in contrast to the anti-colonial frame of the solidarity movement of the late 1970s, illustrates the lessons these activists brought to the campaign and highlights once again the effective use of disruptive tactics and broad alliances. The Navy left Vieques in 2003.

Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation with a review of the aims, objectives, and claims discussed in my introduction in light of the evidence presented in my study.

Research Design, Selection of Participants, and Procedures

This project entailed several methods of research, including interviews, participant observation, review of the literature of El Comité-MINP and of community, student, and labor groups, and searches of newspapers and historical data.

Thirty lengthy, open-ended interviews were conducted with former members of El Comité, who now reside over a geographical spread that includes Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Long Island, upstate New York, and Boston. I traveled to Puerto Rico to interview four of the organization’s founders who left the organization in the mid- to late-1970s to reside permanently in Puerto Rico. Most of the initial interviews were dynamic group discussions, which were extremely fruitful in that they allowed for debate and correction where individual memories of events faltered. I was able to elicit

not only the roles of each individual but also consensus and disagreement on the collective impact of the accomplishments and shortcomings of the experiences. In dozens of follow-up conversations, I asked about the impact of the experience on each of their lives (and political work) following their departure from the organization. I conducted interviews, as well, with non-members who either made important contributions to the organization or were close to its activities.

The former members I interviewed represented a cross-section of the organization's membership through the years. Among them were: early members who left the organization at various stages; early members who participated until its demise; recruits after its mid-decade transition from EC to EC-MINP; members from both sides of the "split;" members from all chapters (except affiliates in Camden and Philadelphia); workers, students, and intellectuals; and Puerto Ricans, one Dominican, one Chicana, and several Whites. I also read through the internal and public documents and newspapers of El Comité and El Comité-MINP, many of which are referenced throughout the manuscript and provided historical context and verification of former members' recollections.²²

My research was partly based on participant observation: I was a member of El Comité-MINP from 1975 to 1982. I participated in the student movement and strikes at SUNY Old Westbury in the mid-1970s; in CUANDO, a community youth organization in the Lower East Side of Manhattan; and in several international solidarity movements, including one that sent over 100 delegates to the XI International Youth Festival in Cuba

²² Though in some cases individuals authored articles and documents of EC-MINP, the vast majority were collaborative efforts. In all cases, it was the organization's practice not to attribute writings to individuals. Respecting that practice, I identified individual authors in the manuscript only when citing transcripts of specific speeches.

in 1978. In those arenas, I observed EC-MINP's debates, strategies, achievements and failures, and participated in its program of political education. As a member of its Lower East Side Chapter, I attended weekly meetings where members discussed their political work, debated the role and direction of the organization, and engaged in political studies. I attended the organization's First Assembly in 1978, which established goals for the organization for the ensuing years, and served in the "Propaganda Commission," writing for the newspaper, *Obreros en Marcha*. My personal archive includes many issues of *Unidad Latina* and *Obreros en Marcha*, and internal and public documents on the structure, rules, and political program of EC-MINP. Former members added documents that were missing from my files.

From this collection and the knowledge gained as a participant, I composed a timeline of the organization's development and political activities and reconstructed, with ancillary literature of the period, the local, national, and international contexts within which the organization formed and evolved. My undergraduate and master's theses focused on aspects of the political and economic history of Puerto Rico and the process of migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States. These prior studies aided the research for this study. I used the public historical record in established media archives and newspapers of various organizations to supplement the memories and accounts related through subject interviews. For further historical context, I searched the collections at CUNY's Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College.

My personal and political connections to El Comité-MINP and many former members extend over many years. This produced advantages and problems for my study. I was attuned to the relationships that were formed between members of El Comité and

the residents of communities where it sought to mobilize. I also understood the intensity of the process of intellectual development and commitment members underwent. Former members I approached for interviews were generally receptive to this project, spent many hours in interviews, and allowed these sessions to be recorded (for the most part). My familiarity with the organization enabled me to raise issues during the interview process that might not otherwise have been addressed.

One of the difficulties was setting aside my individual impressions, recollections, and perspective that I brought to the interview process. I learned many things I did not know and reconsidered some of what I experienced as a participant. Individuals have reviewed sections for accuracy in recounting events but not the introduction or conclusion. I am certain there will not be consensus among former members on the perspective I bring to the project, but I believe there is a shared enthusiasm for the attempt to relate and assess aspects of the experience.

Contribution of Study

This study makes several contributions to the literature on Puerto Rican politics and social movements in the United States. First, it recovers a little-known history of one of the main organizations of Puerto Rican radical activists in New York City in the 1970s. Through my discussion of the origins, rise, and decline of El Comité-MINP, I offer the first thorough assessment of several activist campaigns, with insights into how national identity, race, and class intersected and impacted the perspectives of participants, and the outcomes.

My research adds to the understanding of the elements which contribute to politicization and the development of critical thinking among social activists. It also

provides an assessment of the role of ideas and ideology in social movements, highlighting some of the dilemmas of ideology faced by groups seeking to transform power relations in the United States. The study essentially confirms the partial – or measured – effectiveness of protest that uses disruptive tactics and persuasive, inclusive mobilizing frames, to elicit concessions, within the structural constraints of U.S. society. It also demonstrates the impact that intersecting experiences of national identity, race, and class, may have on people’s ability to develop alternative interpretations of reality – and to resist. Though the campaigns analyzed in my study are now more than thirty years past, they seem particularly relevant today as the political discourse in the U.S. sharpens in what are, at times, racially antagonistic and fractious tones over new immigration from Latin America and over the current wave of economic restructuring.

CHAPTER 2 FORGING IDENTITY

Introduction

"We had just come out of the park. It was a hot summer day, and we wanted to drink a beer," recalled Pedro Rentas as he and several others talked about the origins of El Comité in a recent interview in Puerto Rico.²³ On a June afternoon in 1970, a group of young men in their early 20s, all Puerto Rican except for one Dominican, gathered to play softball at a local sandlot in Manhattan's Upper West Side. Upon emerging from the field and trying to collect beer money to quench their thirst, they began calling on neighborhood residents to chip in for their cause. "Someone started with, 'Hey, I got a dollar.' Here's two, then three. We started horsing around, and people from the windows started throwing us money. Before you knew it, we had almost \$100!" (Pedro Rentas, 6/18/04).

In the summer of 1970 the Upper West Side of Manhattan was a densely populated, ethnically diverse, working-class area. Russians, Irish, Italians, and African Americans lived in close proximity to the newest arrivals – Puerto Ricans who fled growing unemployment in Puerto Rico a decade or two earlier and, in lesser numbers, Dominicans who left the Dominican Republic after 1965 (Lyford 1968). At the western border mainly along West End Avenue and sparsely interspersed within the two-square-mile area, more affluent newcomers (mainly professionals) had begun to inhabit the area through investment incentives offered by the City's Department of Real Estate (Wilson 1987, 37). In the throes of summer's heat, with no air conditioning or elevators in the

²³ Interviews with several founding members were held in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on June 18, 2004. Surnames are used to identify subjects who have been known publicly as members of El Comité-MINP or who have given explicit permission for their use to the author. Names of subjects who prefer anonymity are not used.

tenements, neighborhood residents leaned out of their windows or relaxed on stoops while children played on sidewalks and under the fire hydrants.

"We felt like...this is too much money. At that time a beer cost us a quarter.... So we stopped the ice cream truck and bought ice cream for all the kids. It was marvelous, right? I mean, everybody just came down. We must have bought something like 80 or 90 ice creams that day. And everybody had a great time.... So we did it again the following week." (Pedro Rentas, 6/18/04)

As the story is told by El Comité's founders, the softball players were inspired by the excitement and satisfaction they felt in this one small collective act. They decided to do something more.

"We cleaned up this little basketball court in the lot. Some guy loaned us a movie, we borrowed a projector, and someone gave us light. On Friday night, everybody came down to see the movie, even the Gringos. You know, at the corner it was Puerto Ricans. But further up it was middle-class Gringos. They came down, and they really enjoyed it." (Pedro Rentas, 6/18/04)

In the decade prior to this event, territorial gang fights had plagued the area. The Goddard Riverside Community Center worked with the 24th Police Precinct to engage neighborhood youths in activities aimed at reducing tensions among them.²⁴ The first movie showing, "Planet of the Apes," at the empty lot showed the organizers that pursuing a common interest helped to overcome differences. "We decided to do it again the following week." (Pedro Rentas, 6/18/04)

Initially, the softball players were not part of any social action or political movement. They did not participate in a tenants' association or student protests. Several were armed services veterans; one worked in an automobile factory and another at a steel

²⁴ Luis Ithier described the gang fights between the "downtown group," from W. 85th to W. 96th Streets and the "uptown group," north of W. 96th Street, which sometimes resulted in injuries and deaths from knife stabbings. As a teenager, he was involved in trying to stop the fighting and to "push things in a more positive direction." (Interview, 3/18/06)

plant; others were unemployed laborers. Another, Marine Corps veteran Federico Lora, had recently enrolled in an architectural program at Pratt Institute upon returning from his tour of duty in Vietnam. The young men had not discussed politics and had no political aspirations. However, within a short span of several months, they squatted in a storefront on Columbus Avenue and West 88th Street and became principal agitators for housing rights in their neighborhood. They called themselves El Comité (“The Committee”). Joined first by companions and friends, and gradually by other activists, within several months of forming, they identified with the struggle for independence in Puerto Rico and deepened their involvement in local campaigns for quality housing and education in New York City.

Adopting the symbolic dress of black berets worn by other young militants of their time, they were often mistaken for the Young Lords throughout the city in these early days. But, though the Puerto Rican independence groups at the time shared similar beliefs, El Comité chose to remain separate from the Young Lords and the others, and distinguished itself as a distinct political force in several neighborhoods and work sites and through the pages of its first bi-weekly newspaper, *Unidad Latina*.

Chapter 2 explores the origins of El Comité through the factors that contributed to its initial political identity and influenced its approach to the contentious politics of “Operation Move In,” the West Side housing movement of 1970 whose main tactic was squatting. Part I considers the collective experience of colonialism and migration, the political, economic, and social conditions of exploitation and discrimination Puerto Ricans faced in New York City in the 1960s, and the prior and existing political

movements, especially of the “Third World Left” in the United States that influenced many young Puerto Ricans of the period to seek radical political alternatives.

Part II examines El Comité’s origins and role in the housing movement, particularly the “anti-system framing” of the urban renewal struggle as a fight for the democratic right to housing of “the people” against a system of collaboration between real estate developers, city administrative agencies, and certain elected leaders. This section shows how activists used disruptive tactics effectively, with the support of churches, advocates, and liberal sectors of the community, to redress the city’s disregard for their claims. I conclude the chapter by linking the experience of political struggle, including the exposure to radical ideas, individuals, and other political forces, to El Comité’s embrace of Puerto Rican nationalism and its first efforts with the Young Lords and MPI to call attention to Puerto Rico’s colonial status.

PART I: HISTORICAL CONTEXT: POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

Colonialism and Migration

The generation of young Puerto Rican activists in New York City in the 1960s was deeply influenced by the pro-independence critique of the colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. In 1970 nearly one million Puerto Ricans lived in New York City, the majority of whom came during the second of two major phases of migration. The initial waves occurred in the first four decades of the twentieth century, when approximately 40,000 people left the island for the United States (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1976, 28). With the cut off of a cheap labor supply by the 1921 Immigration Law and 1924 Amendment, manufacturers welcomed Puerto Rican workers, whose U.S. citizenship had been established by the Foraker Act of 1917. Many

thousands more were seasonal migrant farm workers on East Coast farms.²⁵ Between 1940 and 1964, during the period known as the “Great Migration,” nearly one-third of the island’s population followed the path of the pioneer migrants, relocating to New York neighborhoods in East Harlem (El Barrio), the Upper West Side, Lower East Side, Chelsea, the Lincoln Center area, to the South Bronx and Brooklyn, and in smaller numbers to Chicago, Philadelphia, Miami, and parts of New Jersey and Connecticut (Hernández-Alvarez 1995, 372-373).

While the vast majority of prior immigrants from Europe and Asia were economic migrants seeking better opportunities for work and education than existed in their home countries, the stimulus for Puerto Rican migration was more complex than the “push-pull” dynamic of poverty-opportunity. Post-World War II economic displacement in Puerto Rico occurred directly as a result of the collaboration on the island between the local government and U.S. investors to transform Puerto Rico’s agricultural-based economy into the U.S. “Showcase of the Caribbean.” Rapid labor-intensive industrialization under “Operation Bootstrap,” as the plan was known, was supposed to reduce unemployment by providing thousands of industrial jobs while demonstrating the superiority of the capitalist model for third world development and modernization over any socialist alternative. However, in transforming large tracts of land used for export-based sugar production and subsistence farming to manufacturing centers, capital investors did not create industrial jobs in numbers sufficient to incorporate the available workforce. Although manufacturing jobs increased by 36,000 between 1950 and 1960, a

²⁵ See Margaret Gray, *Harvesting Expectations: Farmworker Advocacy in New York*, Ph.D. Dissertation, CUNY Graduate Center, 2006; and Joseph Monserrat, “Development, Growth and Decline of the Puerto Rican Migrant Farmworker Contract Program“, 1991, unpublished in Monserrat Archives, box 17, folder 2, at CUNY’s Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, on farm owners’ increasing preference for foreign workers over Puerto Rican workers in the second half of the twentieth century.

net job loss of 54,000 was due primarily to the decline of 91,000 jobs in agriculture²⁶ (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1976, 16). In Bootstrap's early years, income levels rose in Puerto Rico compared to other underdeveloped countries. But official unemployment rates fluctuated between eleven and thirteen percent, and labor force participation actually declined to below 50 percent of the working-age population²⁷ (Dietz 1986, 275; Fernández 1992, 188; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1976, 16). By comparison, job growth in the United States in the midst of post-World War II economic expansion produced a corresponding increase in labor force participation (Toossi 2002).

The newly-established "Commonwealth" government of Puerto Rico responded to massive unemployment and the proliferation of urban-like slums across the island with theories of "overpopulation"²⁸ (Haslip-Viera 1996; History Task Force, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, 1979). Government reports and speeches advanced two "remedies:" emigration and government-sponsored sterilization programs. By 1965 nearly one million Puerto Ricans had left their homes for urban areas in the United States, the vast majority of whom settled in New York City. The "Showcase" engendered massive migration to

²⁶ Scholars have noted similar results in Mexico under NAFTA and in Caribbean and Central American "free trade zones" where the number of jobs created and the wages paid by the *maquiladoras* do not nearly approximate the need of displaced peasants for employment at livable wages. See, for example, John A. Booth, Christine J. Wade and Thomas W. Walker, *Understanding Central America: Global Forces, Rebellion, and Change*. 4th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2005); Jeff Faux, "NAFTA at 10," *The Nation*, February 2, 2004; Andrew Ross, *No Sweat: Fashion, Free Trade, and the Rights of Garment Workers* (New York: Verso Books, 1997).

²⁷ The "labor force" is defined by the U.S. Department of Labor as the total number of people working and looking for work. Official unemployment rates do not include persons of working age who are unemployed and not actively looking for work as they are not considered part of the labor force. Labor force non-participation may be due to a variety of demographic, socioeconomic, and political factors.

²⁸ Puerto Rico's current political relationship with the United States was defined as a "Free Associated State" or "Commonwealth" in 1952. Although the Commonwealth elects its own governor and legislature, the fundamental colonial power structure remains unaltered. The U.S. Constitution and federal laws retain supremacy over local legislation; but Puerto Rico's "Resident Commissioner" in the U.S. House of Representatives cannot vote, no U.S. senators represent the island's population, nor do residents vote in presidential elections. They do, however, serve in the U.S. armed forces and are subject to national drafts and military recruitment campaigns. Ironically, although all Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, only those living in the fifty states are entitled to vote in national elections.

the U.S. and, eventually, chronic structural unemployment of nearly 25% of the remaining population²⁹ (Dietz 1986, 183-185; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1976, 25). Also by 1965, more than one-third of all women in Puerto Rico had been sterilized, many without their knowledge or consent.³⁰

The U.S. government, through its military bases and political domination, along with the U.S. private sector, maintained an integral presence in Puerto Rico; yet new migrants to the U.S. found they were treated like strangers, with the majority of the U.S. population being completely unfamiliar with Puerto Rico (except as a vacation destination) and unconcerned about the U.S. role in the country. Many young Puerto Ricans had witnessed their parents' struggles with inadequate employment (both in Puerto Rico and the U.S.) and were themselves facing a contracting labor market and inferior education in New York City in the 1960s. The resistance to U.S. occupation of Puerto Rico they remembered from their childhood in Puerto Rico or learned about from their families and from the independence movement in New York angered and inspired some to choose political activism.

²⁹ Puerto Rico's population did not fare better in the decades following Bootstrap. Income inequality, high unemployment, and the consequent dependency of two-thirds of the population on welfare programs worsened as light labor-intensive manufacturing was sent offshore to avoid the federal minimum wage laws applicable to increasing numbers of workers since the 1970s. On the other hand, capital-intensive pharmaceutical and chemical industries utilized federal tax exemptions in Puerto Rico to shield their billion-dollar revenues from federal taxes (Carr 1984; Dietz 1986; Fernández 1992).

³⁰ The practice has been widely documented, in political and population studies, health science journals, and public testimonies. See, for example, Erica M. Gibson-Rosado, *The Sterilization of Women in Puerto Rico Under the Cloak of Colonial Policy: A Case Study on the Role of Perception in U.S. Foreign Policy and Population Control*. (Washington, D.C.: Johns Hopkins University, 1993); Bonnie Mass, "Puerto Rico: A Case Study in Population Control." *Latin American Perspectives* 4, no. 4 (Fall 1977): 66-81; Harriet B. Presser, "The Role of Sterilization in Controlling Puerto Rican Fertility." *Population Studies* 23, no. 3 (November 1969): 343-361.

Puerto Rico's Independence Movement

The bulk of Puerto Rican migration to the United States occurred following a period of acute political repression on the island. From the 1930s through the 1950s, support for national liberation in Puerto Rico was at its peak. U.S. policy sought to eradicate the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party and to silence its popular leaders, especially Pedro Albizu Campos. Thousands would gather to hear Albizu, known as “El Maestro” (the Teacher), characterize the U.S. occupation of Puerto Rico as illegal. The Nationalists believed that the Paris Treaty of 1898 in which Spain ceded possession of Puerto Rico (and the Philippines and Guam) to the U.S. as war booty was illegitimate because Spain had recognized Puerto Rico’s autonomy in 1897. Puerto Rico did not participate nor was it consulted in the Treaty negotiations; and, according to the nationalist perspective, a sovereign nation could not be transferred by the former colonial power to another nation. In the event the legal rationale did not prevail, Albizu Campos, with law and doctoral degrees from Harvard University, drew upon the example of the Boston Tea Party as justification for armed struggle against the United States. The Nationalists organized workers’ strikes against U.S. companies, boycotted colonial elections, and claimed the right of the people to take up arms against the colonizers.³¹

The battle between the Nationalists and the U.S. government lasted for over twenty years. In 1934, under the command of U.S. Colonel E. Francis Riggs, four nationalists were killed in Rio Piedras. The Nationalists who killed Riggs in retaliation two years later were arrested and executed several hours later at the police station without a trial. Albizu was arrested, along with several others, tried, and convicted for “seditious

³¹ Noteworthy among strikes was that of sugar cane workers against U.S. sugar and utilities monopolies in 1934.

conspiracy to overthrow the government of the United States” in Puerto Rico (ACLU 1939, 12). In the Ponce Massacre that followed in 1937, police fired into an unarmed crowd gathered to protest the arrests of the Nationalists. Twenty marchers and bystanders were killed; 200 were wounded (ACLU 1939, 14). Albizu was imprisoned until 1947.

The following year, repression of the Nationalists continued via “Public Law 53,” commonly referred to as “La Ley de La Mordaza” (the “Gag Law,” modeled after the Smith Act of 1940) that made it a felony to “print, publish, edit, circulate, sell, distribute, or publicly exhibit any writing or publication which encourages, pleads, advises, or preaches the necessity, desirability, or suitability of overthrowing the insular government.”³² The Law’s passage was timed to stifle anticipated opposition by patriots to the first election of a local governor which marked the transition from direct colonial rule to the current Commonwealth status.³³ The law was repealed in 1957, but its effects were felt for decades after:

“Accompanying the law was an enforcement apparatus that had – and continues to have – a chilling effect on Puerto Rican society. In 1991, many islanders, whether on a street in Ponce or a bar in Hartford, still refused to openly discuss their independence sentiments. It has become a widespread assumption of the culture that espousing these beliefs means definite trouble for the speaker and potential problems for his or her family.” (Fernández 1992, 177)

The Nationalists struck back at the “Gag Law” and at what they viewed as the “Commonwealth” deception with an attempted insurrection, the Jayuya Rebellion. On

³² Quoted in Fernández, p. 177 from Ivonne Acosta, *La Mordaza*, p. 64.

³³ Though the Law was repealed in 1957, FBI surveillance of pro-independence forces continued for decades. FBI files released in 1999 revealed widespread spying on political, labor, community, and student organizations that spanned decades. See Ramón Bosque-Pérez, “Political Persecution against Puerto Rican Anti-Colonial Activists in the Twentieth Century,” in Ramón Bosque-Pérez and José Javier Colón Morera, eds. *Puerto Rico Under Colonial Rule: Political Persecution Quest for Human Rights* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2006) and Ramón Bosque-Pérez, “The FBI and Puerto Rico: Notes on a Conflictive History,” Testimony before the Congressional Briefing, Judiciary Committee Democratic Office, U.S. House of Representatives (undated).

October 30, 1950, nationalist forces occupied the town of Jayuya, declaring the right to self-determination and proclaiming the “Republic of Puerto Rico.” Simultaneously, nationalists attempted to occupy La Fortaleza, the old Spanish fort in San Juan. A day later, in a desperate attempt to call the attention of the world to their cause, Nationalists Oscar Collazo and Griselio Torresola attacked the Blair House, the temporary residence of President Truman in Washington, D.C.³⁴ One guard and Torresola were killed. Collazo was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to life in prison. At La Fortaleza, four nationalists and one police officer were killed. The U.S. air force bombed Jayuya for six days. Military tanks rolled across the island; hundreds were wounded and arrested, while Albizu Campos was jailed, convicted of conspiracy, and sentenced to eighty years in prison.

The passage of the Gag Law and the swift suppression of the Jayuya Rebellion reflected Puerto Rico’s growing geopolitical importance as well as the U.S. desire to showcase the colony as a development model (Grosfoguel 1999). National liberation struggles in Indochina and Korea and anti-regime movements from Greece to Guatemala disturbed the U.S. In oil-rich Iran, the nationalist movement threatened the rule of the U.S.-friendly regime of the Shah. The U.S. and other foreign capital were deeply entrenched in the Caribbean and Central America, especially in Puerto Rico, Cuba, Jamaica, and Guatemala, and opposed movements for land reform, nationalization of resources, and democracy throughout Latin America and elsewhere (Kinzer 2006; Johnson 2000; Kinzer 1991; Stephens and Stephens 1986; Schlesinger and Kinzer 1983; Smith 2000). In the context of the Cold War containment policy of the Truman Doctrine,

³⁴ President Truman lived in Blair House, the official state guest house, from 1948 to 1952 while the White House was under renovation.

the strategically located military bases in Puerto Rico gave the U.S. easy access to neighboring Caribbean and Central American countries and blocked access to the Panama Canal.

The defeat of the Jayuya Rebellion and subsequent repression added to the climate of fear and reluctance to express pro-nationalist sentiments in Puerto Rico.³⁵ Still, in a second startling attempt to draw the world's attention to Puerto Rico's struggle, on March 1, 1954, four nationalists who made their way into the U.S. House of Representatives Gallery fired 30 shots from automatic pistols onto the House floor, wounding five members of Congress. As she unfurled a Puerto Rican flag, Lolita Lebrón shouted, "Viva Puerto Rico Libre."³⁶ Lebrón, Irving Flores, Rafael Cancel Miranda and Andrés Figueroa Cordero joined Oscar Collazo as "political prisoners" in U.S. federal prison for the next twenty-five years.³⁷ Puerto Rico's first elected Governor, Luis Muñoz

³⁵ Though scholars and activists have made this claim, it is difficult to document "reluctance" by people to express political beliefs in a repressive environment. In at least a dozen trips to Puerto Rico in the 1970s and 1980s, on personal visits and to conduct research for my master's thesis (including one of several months' duration through many small towns in the countryside), I learned that "Don Pedro" Albizu Campos is widely regarded as a Puerto Rican hero, holding a place symbolically similar to that of Che Guevara in Latin America or Martin Luther King, Jr. in the United States. His face is on t-shirts; schools, plazas, and roads bear his name. Yet the Nationalist Party he led was considered a communist-inspired, terrorist organization by the House Committee on Un-American Activities in the 1950s.

³⁶ Extensive coverage of the shooting and subsequent round-ups of Nationalists on the island can be found in the *New York Times*, March 2 through May 17, 1954. The terms "fanatics" and "terrorists" engaged in "seditious conspiracy" used by the media to characterize the Nationalist Party had changed from the typical 1950 description of Nationalists as "rebels" or "extremists" engaged in "uprisings." See, for example, "Revolt Flares in Puerto Rico: Soon Quelled with 23 Dead;" "Puerto Rico Blasts Remaining Rebels; Planes and Tanks Recapture Two Strongholds;" "Eisenhower Target for Fanatics Also;" and "Terrorists' Chief Held in San Juan After Gun Battle." *New York Times*, October 31, 1950; November 1, 1950; March 2, 1954; and March 7, 1954, respectively.

³⁷ The U.S. never recognized the designation, "political prisoners," as it does not admit to colonial occupation. Though there is no internationally recognized definition, the Puerto Rican independence and solidarity movements interpreted the actions of the Nationalists as part of a broader rebellion against U.S. repression and occupation, similar to those of American revolutionaries, patriots in Northern Ireland against British occupation, and Algerians who fought French Colonialism. In this sense, the label "political prisoners" does not deny that laws were broken or violence used; it is intended to call attention to and stimulate discussion of the political context in which acts against the state were committed. As Fernández notes, and the *New York Times* articles cited above show, the U.S. media characterized the Nationalists as "ruthless terrorists" and "fanatics" without noting the similarity between Lebrón's written note, "My life I

Marín, revoked the pardon he had extended to Albizu Campos a year earlier and ordered him back to prison, and dozens of Nationalist Party members were rounded up on the island and charged with seditious conspiracy.³⁸ Ironically, FBI files released to Congressman José Serrano and currently being catalogued by CUNY's Center for Puerto Rican Studies reveal that Muñoz Marín was a subject of FBI surveillance and "alleged to have used Communist Party leaders and principles to gain political power."³⁹

Colonialism and Nationalism as Factors of Identity

The political tensions inherent in the colonial structure were not confined to Puerto Rico, nor were these tensions brought to the attention of Puerto Ricans in the United States solely by pro-independence organizations operating in the United States. Based on the extent of support for the Nationalists in Puerto Rico and the experience of economic displacement, it is reasonable to assume that many migrants to New York were displeased with the colonial relationship. We know, for example, that Congressman Vito Marcantonio, on behalf of his Puerto Rican constituents in New York's East Harlem in the 1940s, spoke in Congress against U.S. colonialism.⁴⁰ (Rubinstein 1956) Whether or

give for the freedom of my country" and the American revolutionary pledge, "Give me liberty or give me death." (1992: 182, 186)

Not all acts of violence committed in the name of independence were supported by organizations of the Puerto Rican Left. For example, El Comité called the Manhattan bombings for which the F.A.L.N. took credit in 1975, killing civilians at a time when there was no active rebellion in Puerto Rico, acts of terrorism ("On Terrorism." *Obreros en Marcha*, vol. 1, no. 5 April 1975: 4-5, 9).

³⁸ Albizu Campos suffered a stroke in prison in 1956 and was pardoned again in 1964 when he was near death. He died in Puerto Rico in 1965.

³⁹ See files online of CUNY's Center for Puerto Rican Studies, www.centropr.org, and Chapter 3 for further discussion and full references to data on FBI surveillance.

⁴⁰ Although red-baited during the McCarthy Era for his advocacy of expanded rights for the poor and affiliation with the American Labor Party, Congressman Marcantonio served his constituents, predominantly Italian, Puerto Rican, and African American, from the 18th Congressional District on Manhattan's East Side for fourteen years. A condensed version of his speeches in Congress related to the colonial status of Puerto Rico was compiled by Annette T. Rubinstein and El Comité-MINP for the Third World Coalition, a program of the American Friends Service Committee (exact date of publication unknown, presumed to be mid-1970s). A copy of the pamphlet will be submitted to CUNY's Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, following the deposit of the dissertation. Further references in this

not they supported independence or any of the other status configurations for their homeland, Puerto Ricans who migrated to the U.S. in the 1940s through 1960s, at the very least, were aware of the U.S. and local government reactions to mobilizations by nationalists in Puerto Rico.

The majority of men and women who formed El Comité or joined in its first two years either arrived in New York as young children with their families between the 1940s and 1960s or were born here of working-class, immigrant parents. Most came from rural areas outside of old colonial towns, such as Ponce and Mayaguez, or from emerging urban centers near San Juan, such as Bayamón. Some had families who were sympathetic to the nationalists; others did not but struggled with questions about their place in U.S. society while growing up in New York City. Nelson Gómez, a former construction worker and the oldest member of El Comité, remembered his affiliation with the Nationalists as a child in Puerto Rico: “I was influenced by the barber in Mayaguez who used to talk about Don Pedro. I posted signs for the Nationalists in my town” (Nelson Gómez, 4/20/06). Frank Vergara, who joined in 1972, recalled:

“In those days, I was pro-independence, no doubt about it.... I used to tell people in El Comité I’m in the movement because of my mother and grandmother.... My mom founded the first self-help Puerto Rican organization in the Lower East Side, the Puerto Rican Action group.... I never had an identity crisis.... I was Puerto Rican, and I got that from my mother and grandmother. They came here when Truman ordered the liquidation of the Nationalist Party. Why? Because my grandmother was an organizer, and they were fleeing for their lives.” (Frank Vergara, 9/4/04)⁴¹

chapter to documents to be donated to the Center’s archives will be indicated with the acronym, “PATBDC.”

⁴¹ While presumably some migrants believed they would be subjected to less harassment in the U.S., it is difficult to say whether that would have been the case had they continued to be as politically active as they had been on the island. Two factors suggest otherwise: first was the repressive political environment created by the Smith Act and McCarthy years. Second was the FBI’s COINTELPRO, which targeted activists of the revived pro-independence movement in the 1970s in the U.S. and Puerto Rico.

Pedro Rentas, an automobile factory worker in Tarrytown when he joined El Comité, described himself as “a stone [firm] nationalist.” His mother lived in Ponce at the time of the 1937 Massacre and was one of the women who sewed hats for the Nationalists.

“She always talked about that. When she found out I was getting involved, she got scared, really scared. She knew what happened down there [in Ponce]. People got hurt.”
(Pedro Rentas, 6/18/04)

Politics was not prevalent in the childhood experience of Carmen Martell, who described herself as apolitical growing up in New York City. She came to New York from Bayamón in 1952 at the age of eight with her sister and mother, and lived in single-room-occupancy dwellings with her aunt for her first few years in Manhattan. Her mother found employment in a plastics factory. For Carmen and other young Puerto Rican children, the first few years in public schools were very difficult because they did not speak English but were not allowed to communicate even among themselves in Spanish. In eighth grade, “as a person of color” she was tracked into a secretarial school, Central Commercial High School (now Norman Thomas) rather than an academic school. Her interest in Puerto Rico developed when her cousin and anti-war activist, Esperanza Martell, brought her to MPI activities. Carmen later used her skills as head of the typesetters for El Comité’s first newspaper, *Unidad Latina* (Carmen Martell, 8/20/04).

Maria Collado had a similar school experience. Her father spoke to her in Spanish as a child because he felt she and her siblings would certainly learn English in school but should also retain their original language.

“Unfortunately for me, when I went to public school not speaking English, they treated me like a dummy. There were no bilingual programs that embraced different cultures and nationalities, and I was placed in a special class for ‘los dummies.’ I caught on to the language quickly of

course, but it kind of stayed with me always that I was stupid and had to prove myself.” (Maria Collado, 8/2/04)

As a child in South Ozone Park, Jaime Suárez’ closest friends were African American, and he was drawn to the Black Power movement that introduced him to Malcolm X’s Autobiography. He learned later that his grandparents had fought against Franco as members of the Spanish Communist Party and his father had read Marx and Engels as a youngster. When the family came from Puerto Rico to the United States, his father and uncles joined a social club in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. Though not formally “political,” this club and others like it were actually self-help societies whose founders were either anti-Franco exiles from Spain or Puerto Ricans previously associated with nationalist or socialist politics in Puerto Rico. Fearing the dangers, Jaime’s family tried to discourage his involvement in politics.

After moving to Holtsville, Long Island, as a teenager, Jaime chose college over Vietnam at his brother’s insistence. At Suffolk Community College in Brentwood, Long Island, he met one of the Young Lords who was distributing the newspaper *Pa’lante*, and then met a member of PSP who was one of his instructors at SUNY Stony Brook. Apart from the mobilizations taking place in the city around independence and quality-of-life issues, similar stirrings were occurring in the heavily Puerto Rican-populated Brentwood:

“The 60s created an environment where people just started reacting to their conditions and started doing something about them. [In Brentwood] you didn’t have political movements like El Comité or the Young Lords. But people started dealing with their problems, feeling like we have a right to do this. There was a Puerto Rican cultural center that brought the community together. It wasn’t politically motivated at first; but by 1970-71, it became political around the issue of police brutality.... [Activists] started challenging the authorities.... There were also individuals who had been involved in the Nationalist Party who...began to get involved in education issues.... So in my case, I was influenced by nationalism and by community and was

involved politically for about two years before joining El Comité.
(Jaime Suárez, 3/18/06)

Placing the coincidence of nationalist repression in Puerto Rico and migration in the context of McCarthy-era efforts to hush dissent from all quarters, Luis Ithier, an army veteran from the Upper West Side, captured the concerns of his parents' generation:

“You have to remember that our parents came here during repression of the independence movement in the 1950s when everybody was getting killed or imprisoned. No matter what, if you thought freedom in your mind, you were jailed. They sent the militia and everything else. That dissuaded a whole lot of people who had nationalistic feelings from expressing them. Even here in the U.S., nationalism was a bad word because you remembered what happened to the nationalists in Washington.” (Luis Ithier, 3/18/06)

The common thread running through these and other stories is the indignation and sense of empowerment individuals gained from their exposure, however acquired, to the cause of Puerto Rican independence. No doubt, cultural nationalism was (and is) strong among Puerto Ricans in the United States as it was, for example, among Italian immigrants and descendants. And it was strengthened by the air bridge between Puerto Rico and the United States, enabling an ongoing attachment to the land of origin that did not exist for most European immigrants. However, the colonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico added a distinctive dimension to Puerto Rican political identity, the extent of which is still little understood in the larger society. The independence movement in New York in the 1960s and 1970s provided the main path for Puerto Ricans to understand their history and heritage, especially in an educational system where teaching professionals and textbooks ignored or misrepresented the relationship between Puerto Rico and “the mainland.” The colonial legacy discredited the

school book story of U.S. democracy and the belief in Wilsonian ideals as the basis for U.S. conduct in the world (González 2000, 93-94; Guzmán 1980; Melendez 2003).

Puerto Ricans and New York's Political Economy: 1960s

The U.S. economy boomed in the post-World War II period through the early 1970s until a combination of national and international conditions began to impede economic growth and reverse the rising standard of living for sectors of U.S. workers (Harrison and Bluestone 1990). But prosperity at the height of growth and suffering at the depths of recession were not shared equitably by U.S. workers. Despite the 1960s "War on Poverty" and affirmative action legislation, the average income of Puerto Rican families in the U.S. dropped from 71 percent in 1960 to 59 percent in 1970 of the national average income; one-third of all Puerto Rican families lived below the poverty line by 1974 (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1976, 47).

New York City's transition from a manufacture- to a service-based economy affected minority groups first in the form of economic contraction. Simultaneously with a massive outflow of Whites to the suburbs, New York City lost 500,000 jobs in the 1960s and 1970s, most in the manufacturing sector (Ross and Trachte 2006, 108). In the 1960s alone, the number of Puerto Ricans employed in the manufacturing sector dropped from 55 percent to 41 percent of all employed Puerto Ricans (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1976, 52). Though office jobs increased slightly, the housing shortage encouraged some large corporations to leave and discouraged others from locating their headquarters in Manhattan. Workers took what was available in the service sectors, as waiters, kitchen help, porters, and hospital workers, and in light industry sweatshops. But through the

1970s, the New York City unemployment rate for Puerto Ricans was twice the overall rate.⁴²

In seeking employment in New York, the Puerto Rican experience was similar to that of African Americans. Both were excluded from the private unionized sectors that had negotiated job security and career ladders through collective bargaining. This was especially true in the construction trades where White immigrant workers and their descendants, aided by union leaders, blocked union entry and opposed affirmative action programs by aligning with the Nixon administration against the more liberal policy proposals of Mayor Lindsay.⁴³ To make matters worse, the encroaching fiscal crisis in New York City threatened to disproportionately affect recently hired minorities in the public sector and those who depended most on public health care, education and welfare programs.

By the late 1960s, housing deterioration in neighborhoods inhabited by low-income residents of New York City had become critical. The federally subsidized high-rise housing projects built in the 1950s under the direction of Robert Moses had failed the city's poor. Neighborhoods were destroyed when sites were cleared for public housing construction. With few small businesses and low-rise buildings remaining, the areas surrounding the projects spiraled downward. Not only were the projects architectural eyesores but they were chronically undermaintained, effectively marginalizing thousands of city residents. As bad as public high-rise conditions were, thousands of applicants lingered for years on waiting lists for entry to the projects.

⁴² Andrés Torres, "Human Capital, Labor Segmentation, and Inter-Minority Relative Status" (Ph.D. diss., New School for Social Research, 1988) cited in Torres 1995, 62.

⁴³ A fuller discussion of the local construction industry's response to affirmative action in New York follows in Chapter 3.

Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and long-time African American residents occupied the worst of the city's public and non-public housing stock, even in the less-segregated neighborhoods of the West Side:

“The essential nature of the housing into which dark-skinned (sic) newcomers are funneled can be described very simply. The larger and poorer the family unit, the less living space it has, and the more dilapidated the housing. In one typically overcrowded sector of the West Side, for instance, 62 percent of the Negroes (sic) and 42 percent of the Spanish (sic) lived in one or two rooms.... [O]f those Spanish families in one- or two-room apartments, 68 percent had one or more children.” (Lyford 1968, 6)⁴⁴

Many of the crumbling buildings in the area had been constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as single-family homes and converted in the mid-1900s to rooming houses by absentee landlords. The city collaborated in the West Side's rapid increase in population density by approving, time after time, zoning changes for the subdivision of larger apartments into smaller units. Interspersed between these buildings were private tenements, public housing units, abandoned buildings, and some owner-occupied brownstones. The plumbing, heating, and electrical systems in hundreds of city- and privately owned buildings were antiquated. Residents were frustrated by frequent power outages triggered simply by turning on a toaster at the same time a fan recycled hot, stale air; many families lived without functional kitchen and bathroom facilities. Epidemic rat infestation and lead poisoning threatened the health of children who were already underserved by resource-strained health providers in poor neighborhoods.

School conditions for most African American and Puerto Rican children were equally dismal by the time the first Puerto Rican, Joseph Monserrat, was appointed

⁴⁴ The statistics cited by Lyford were compiled by John Kraft, Inc. from a *Survey of Attitudes and Population Characteristics: Strykers Bay* (November, 1963-February, 1964) sponsored by The Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, Santa Barbara, California.

President of the New York City Board of Education in 1969. The schools Puerto Ricans and African Americans attended were the most densely populated. Despite the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling and the persistent national myth that segregation was a southern problem, racial segregation in education worsened in the New York region in the 1960s (and is even more acute today) (Gittell and Hevesi 1969; Orfield, Bachmeier, James and Eitle 1997). In disproportionate numbers, minority students were tracked into special education programs as early as the first grade and, if they did not drop out, ended up in vocational rather than academic high schools.

Though Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965⁴⁵ and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 provided federal funds to schools with large numbers of children who were poor and/or not fluent in English, the children needing those resources most did not benefit because the funds were used to provide regular instructional services which, in other schools, were financed by local funds. “Puerto Ricans were thought of not as people but as ‘the Puerto Rican problem,’ as welfare recipients;” and students whose primary language was other than English were “barred from meaningful participation in education programs.”⁴⁶ Between 1960 and 1970, the high school dropout rate hovered around thirty percent for Puerto Rican students and twenty-five percent for African Americans, while it remained under ten percent for Whites⁴⁷ (Monserrat, undated).

⁴⁵ Title I was reauthorized in the “Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994.”

⁴⁶ Joseph Monserrat, “*Hispanics-U.S.A.*,” unpublished manuscripts in Monserrat Archives, Box 2, at CUNY’s Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College.

⁴⁷ New York City Board of Education Profiles reported dropout rates of students with “Spanish surnames.” The U.S. Census Bureau used a similar category for “Americans with Spanish surnames.” With these categories, immigrants from Spain, Puerto Ricans, as well as other Latin Americans of varied ancestry were racially grouped.

In 1960, the median income of Puerto Rican and African American families approximately 60% and 70%, respectively, that of Whites; by 1970 the gap widened to 53% for Puerto Ricans and 69% for African Americans.⁴⁸ Though African Americans made greater inroads into the public sector as civil servants, both groups were the first and worst hit by the fiscal crisis of the 1970s. They paid the highest rents for the worst housing and were stuck in the poorest schools. A few Puerto Ricans entered mainstream politics, especially under liberal city administrations. But, as a U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics report in 1976 observed, Puerto Rican appointees or elected officials were unable to improve the socioeconomic profile of Puerto Ricans.⁴⁹

Political Protest in New York: 1960s

In one sense, political protest in New York City in the 1960s was, in broad terms, structurally conditioned by the contradictions embodied in national economic expansion: on the one hand, economic growth, rising incomes, and low unemployment for some sectors; on the one hand, embedded poverty, poor services, high unemployment, and police repression for others, predominantly minorities. In his study of Latino resistance to urban renewal policies in the Mission District of San Francisco, Castells (1983) suggests that urban resistance movements in the period can be understood as demands based on dissatisfaction with “collective consumption” in housing, education, welfare programs, and jobs, and also as a defense of cultural or communities identities.

Although in the early 1960s, especially after the death of Malcolm X, New York was not a principal location for civil rights movement activity, CORE remained active in Harlem and, among other things, raised the profile of police brutality against minority

⁴⁸ Figures are compiled based on median family incomes reported in Torres 1995, 63.

⁴⁹ See U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *A Socio-Economic Profile of Puerto Rican New Yorkers*. 1976.

youth. When a black youth was killed by an off-duty officer in 1964, police arrested CORE's leaders at a protest rally in Harlem. Five nights of riots followed the arrests, during which 15 blacks were shot by police (one fatally) and 116 people were injured. (Lader 1979, 158-159) For the next few years, spontaneous riots and organized rallies occurred in several communities in response to incidents of police brutality.⁵⁰

The first half of the decade is also well-known for tenant rent strikes. Mobilization for Youth, CORE, Metropolitan Council on Housing, University Settlement, and Puertorriqueños Unidos were key groups distributing information on tenants' rights and supporting rent strikes throughout the city. Although strikes were frequent, tenant militancy was difficult to sustain:

“[T]enant unions proved monumentally difficult to organize.... Radicals thought they would have little trouble mobilizing the poor against greedy landlords and callous city agencies. But they managed precious little mobilization because the poor swamped them with routine requests – usually for access to those very agencies.... By the mid-1960s the Housing Authority was landlord to more than one-half million in over one hundred projects, and the waiting list for coveted apartments was one hundred thousand families, a vast undertow of the city's poor.” (Schwartz 1986, 10-11)

The tenant movement resulted in few reforms and did not stop the spread of slums or significantly increase the supply of desirable public housing. By the late 1960s, tenant advocates and local tenants' councils wanted to explore more aggressive solutions to the escalating housing crisis.

Labor activity was visible as well. On January 1, 1966, the first day of Mayor Lindsay's tenure, the Transit Workers Union and Amalgamated Transit Union began a twelve-day strike for higher wages and better work environments. Other job actions by

⁵⁰ Extensive media coverage is available in the *New York Times* on the participants in demonstrations, police and mayoral reactions, and the intervention of the FBI in the mid-1960s in New York City.

city unions occurred and, in some instances, exposed a growing rift between White union members and minorities interested in job access and educational reform. The strike of the United Federation of Teachers in 1968 drew a clear line of hostility between the union on one side and the parents and other activists in minority-dominant districts on the other side who wanted New York City School Board power decentralized into local community school boards where parents could have greater input into educational policy and school conditions.

Indeed, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, the political environment in New York City was volatile. The writings of Malcolm X, the southern-based civil rights movement, the ideas of affirmative action, and the emerging Black Panthers' platform of community control spread through minority communities and merged with students demanding open admissions to the City University system, insisting on the incorporation of Puerto Rican and Black Studies programs, and protesting the Vietnam War. When activists from Harlem, East Harlem, and the Upper West Side joined forces with Columbia students to protest the War and to condemn Columbia's proposal for a new gymnasium in Morningside Park, alarms rang throughout the city and especially in the offices of the New York City School Board. In April 1968, police forcibly and violently removed hundreds of students from the buildings they had taken over on campus.⁵¹ Expressing concern for "escalating rebellion" among "radical fringes" in the schools, the School Board directed its faculty to attend workshops on how to control unrest, walkouts, and school takeovers.⁵² Internal discussions between the Board and the High School

⁵¹ Melendez, pp. 75-76; *New York Times* articles on Columbia building takeovers by students on May 1, 5, 7, 22, 23, 1968.

⁵² This information was obtained from the Monserrat Archives, Box 10, at CUNY's Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College.

Principals' Association focused on developing strategies to "isolate militants."⁵³ Fearing spontaneous youth reactions, New York City schools were shut down the day after four student anti-war protesters were killed by the Ohio National Guard at Kent State University in May 1970.

In this environment, two significant but distinct radical movements of Puerto Rican activists attempted to draw Puerto Ricans into political action. With the goal of recruiting Puerto Ricans in the U.S. to the independence movement, the recently established branch of the Movimiento Pro Independencia (MPI, Pro-Independence Movement) held meetings in New York City neighborhoods to discuss Puerto Rico's colonial status and sponsored street gatherings commemorating key historical moments of nationalist rebellions. MPI believed, at this point, that Puerto Ricans in the U.S. should make the anti-colonial movement their political priority.

Meanwhile, a very different Puerto Rican movement emerged. In 1967, the Young Lords of Chicago, led by Cha Cha Jiménez and inspired by the Black Panther Party, transformed from a street gang to a militant political action group seeking community control in their neighborhoods. Nearly two years later, an East Harlem activist and SUNY College at Old Westbury student, Mickey Melendez, and a college admissions officer originally from Chicago, Pat Sweeney, drove to Chicago to recruit Latino students to Old Westbury.⁵⁴ There, Melendez met Jimenez for the first time, initiating a network of communication between New York activists and the more organized Chicago group. In 1969, a newly formed East Coast chapter of the Young Lords Organization exploded onto the scene in New York City, with militant opposition

⁵³ Monserrat Archives, Box 10, at CUNY's Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College.

⁵⁴ A fuller account of Old Westbury's "mission" to recruit a diverse student body is in Chapter 4. The story of the trip to Chicago appears in Melendez 2003, 83-85.

to poor housing, inadequate sanitation services, and inferior schools in East Harlem.

Mickey Melendez recalls the thrill of confrontation in the famous “Garbage Offensive” in

El Barrio:

“[A]rmed with large brooms, the Lords and some volunteers swept the street and stockpiled large quantities of garbage. [But]...the trucks of the Department of Sanitation did not come. When at last they did, half the garbage was left scattered all over the area.... [W]e started to sweep the garbage into the streets, particularly around the bus stops and the center of Second and Third Avenues, near 106th, 111th, 116th, and 118th Streets.... [T]he garbage formed a five-foot-high wall across the six lanes of Third Avenue, causing an unexpected traffic jam. Some drivers cursed and screamed at the piles of garbage and at us. Others nodded their heads and blew the horns of their cars in admiration of this never-before-seen-strategy in ghetto politics. The only choice we had was confrontational politics.... The torching of the accrued garbage was about to take place.... Every single Young Lord threw a match.” (Melendez 2003, 102-105)⁵⁵

Two years prior to the garbage protests, Mayor Lindsay had convened a conference of Puerto Rican community groups, asking for recommendations to the city for improving living conditions in Puerto Rican neighborhoods. Despite several proposals made by the groups, no qualitative changes in housing, sanitation conditions, education, or other services occurred.⁵⁶ Illustrating the dynamic Tarrow (1998) describes to explain why social movements choose confrontational tactics, the growing frustration with routine political avenues and cynicism toward the Lindsay Administration’s empathetic gestures motivated the protesters. According to Young Lords’ accounts, the garbage protest was designed to show local residents that disruption was necessary to get the city

⁵⁵ Former Young Lords speak about their origin in Chicago and activities in East Harlem, including the “Garbage Offensive,” in two documentaries: *Yo Soy Boricua, P’a que tu lo sepa (I’m Puerto Rican, Just So You Know)*; and *Pa’lante Siempre Pa’lante (Forward Always Forward)*.

⁵⁶ In media coverage of the conference, Mayor Lindsay is quoted as saying, “The aspirations of the Puerto Rican community are just, and their fulfillment is imperative. See, “Puerto Ricans Lay Inaction to Mayor,” *New York Times*, July 28, 1967.

to act on just demands.⁵⁷ Through the media attention garnered by this and similarly disruptive actions over the next two years, the Young Lords dramatically raised the profile of Puerto Rican grievances in New York City (Sánchez 2007, 204-07). The group's militancy, no doubt, influenced many activists just around the time when a revitalized housing movement on the West Side chose squatting as its strategy for confronting the city and private slumlords.

Disagreeing that disruptive movements develop spontaneously from rising discontent, Freeman (1999) argues that successful social movements include two important elements: a preexisting communications network and a population that is receptive and "cooptible" to new ideas. Though the Young Lords were not primary actors in the housing movement that erupted in 1970, these activists expanded networks of communication and contributed greatly to the growing acceptance among Puerto Ricans of contentious protest as effective political action. On the West Side of Manhattan, the city's disregard for the needs of low-income residents in the urban renewal zones provoked confrontation.

Part II: El Comité's Formative Influences: Housing and Nationalism

Urban "Renewal" or "Removal"?

Following World War II, the demand for a federal response to housing shortages and urban decay made by a broad coalition of progressive political forces and organized labor led to the passage of the Housing Act of 1949, which stated that every American deserves a "decent home and a suitable living environment" (Lang and Sohmer 2000). However, the implementation of the Act, under Title I, proved controversial in the nation's cities as federal funds were used to implement housing reform known as "slum

⁵⁷ See "East Harlem Youths Explain Garbage-Dumping Demonstration," *New York Times*, August 9, 1969.

clearance” (Lang and Sohmer 2000; Davies 1966). Whereas the earliest projects conceived under the 1949 legislation entailed complete neighborhood demolition and new construction, federal legislation in 1954 expanded federal housing support to include urban renewal projects that combined demolition and new construction with neighborhood conservation and renovation.

In New York City, Mayor Robert F. Wagner, Jr. established the Urban Renewal Board to oversee a pilot project in the West Side Urban Renewal Area that ran from West 87th to West 97th Streets between Central Park West and Amsterdam Avenue (Davies 1966, 112). As approved in 1959, the project was to build 7,800 low- and high-rise, public and private, housing units, of which 1,000 would be reserved for low-income; 4,200 for middle-income; and 2,600 for upper-income residents. The plan represented a compromise between the Urban Renewal Board and the Strycker’s Bay Neighborhood Council, which was comprised of seventeen tenant and neighborhood organizations in the urban renewal area and had negotiated an increase in the numbers of low- and middle-income units over the numbers in the original plan.

In 1962, the Puerto Rican Citizen’s Housing Committee was formed by five Puerto Ricans who had worked in various city agencies to study the impact of the plan on Puerto Rican residents. The Committee took the position that no less than 30 percent of the 7,800 housing units (i.e., 2,340 units) should be designated for low-income occupants and that minimal demolition and relocation of residents in the area should occur. Though the Committee was not a “grassroots” organization with members-at-large from any neighborhood, its report was publicized through local newspapers and tenant advocates. Around the same time, Strycker’s Bay on the West Side elected a new president, Father

Henry Browne of St. Gregory's Church, described as "a personality reminiscent of the Hollywood stereotype of the waterfront priest" (Davies 1966, 134). Under Father Browne's leadership, Strycker's Bay joined the Puerto Rican Citizens' Housing Committee in calling for the 30 percent low-income designation, minimal neighborhood disruption, and stronger government commitment to the rehabilitation of existing housing for working class people. These demands became the goals of the housing movement in the ensuing years.

By the time Mayor Lindsay took office in 1966, the city had acquired dozens of two-story buildings and tenements whose landlords preferred to abandon the properties rather than make city-mandated repairs (Schwartz 1986).⁵⁸ But the West Side Urban Renewal Area plan had no provision to renovate salvageable abandoned buildings for tenants currently living in inferior housing.⁵⁹ It called only for redevelopment through the demolition of thousands of housing units, the building of new subsidized apartments, and tax incentives for private investors for market rate housing. Rather than admitting that low-income residents would not have access to the new housing, the city promised that families removed from selected sites for the duration of repairs would be welcomed back to their neighborhoods.

The premise of "urban renewal" was that new and improved housing occupied by a mixture of low- and middle-income families paying income-adjusted rents would stabilize communities and ensure long-term prosperity. Everyone would benefit: the city's deals with private developers would stimulate construction and real estate

⁵⁸ For further discussion of the causes and effects of landlord abandonment, pertaining particularly to the South Bronx, see Jill Jonnes, *South Bronx Rising: The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of an American City* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).

⁵⁹ See "Squatters Cast Doubt on Housing Plans," *New York Times*, October 11, 1970.

investment; housing would be upgraded for low-income residents and made more attractive to middle- and upper-income families. The influx of investment funds and class integration would invigorate the local economy.

But residents' prior experience with Title I projects on the West Side cast doubt on the city's claims. Earlier in the decade, 4,000 residential units had been demolished through a Title I project from West 97th to West 100th Street, between Central Park West and Amsterdam Avenues (the Park West Village Development); and, despite promises to the contrary, the majority of displaced residents were unable to afford the rents in the newly constructed buildings:

“The urban renewal area undergoes a nervous as well as a physical breakdown.... In the midst of the collapse the Puerto Ricans and Negroes of the side streets and the Irish in the tenements on Columbus and Amsterdam Avenues drop into an invisible stream of immigrants to some other place inside or outside the city. Although nearly three-quarters of the people in the [urban renewal] Area questioned about their plans indicated they wanted to remain on the West Side, most of the Negroes and Puerto Ricans will not be able to afford to live in the new community or qualify for the limited public housing. The ineligibles will move again and again, the records on them will be lost, and they will become mired in a gray, deteriorating area in another borough with neither the will nor the energy to retrace their steps. The unemployed Negroes and Puerto Ricans leaving the area are the people always found in neighborhoods being torn down, rehabilitated, or renewed for someone else.” (Lyford 1968, 8-9) emphasis added.⁶⁰

The dismal record of dislocating the city's poor was revealed, as well, by the recently completed Lincoln Center urban renewal area, where new development was primarily nonresidential, and relocated families (Puerto Rican, in large numbers) were

⁶⁰ See also, Davies 1966 for a history of Title I of the 1949 Housing Act and urban renewal projects in Manhattan's West Side and West Village. Also see accounts of my interviewees on lost records, cited in footnote 76, indicating the prophetic nature of Lyford's claim.

unable to return once redevelopment had been completed.⁶¹ When asked to explain the failed promise, the city insisted that all known, eligible residents were given the opportunity to apply for the new housing if they could afford the rent – the operative principles being “eligibility” and “affordability.” The federal Housing and Urban Development Act of 1970 redefined subsidy guidelines by increasing the percentage of income public housing tenants were required to pay which, together with higher-than-expected rents, kept families who relied on Section 8 out of the new housing developments.⁶² In the West Side and Morningside Heights areas where many buildings were slated for demolition, for years the city ignored tenants’ grievances or, at best, assigned insufficient numbers of inspectors to issue fines (considered by advocates too low to be effective) to unresponsive slumlords. “Urban removal,” as it was dubbed by local activists, increased racial and class segregation rather than integration by forcing long-time tenants out of hundreds of sound buildings and relocating them to inferior housing in the outer boroughs. Those who remained in overcrowded and often unsafe tenements gleaned no hope from redevelopment plans.

Adding to the disillusionment with “urban removal” was the growing appearance of collusion between private developers and Puerto Rican political or anti-poverty agency leaders, particularly Herman Badillo, Ramón Velez, and Amy Betances, who tried to disguise the impact of redevelopment on low-income, minority communities.⁶³ In 1962

⁶¹ The Lincoln Center redevelopment was spearheaded by in 1955 by Robert Moses, then chair of the Mayor’s Committee on Slum Clearance. Prior to redevelopment, the Lincoln Square area of the Upper West Side was the site used for filming “West Side Story.”

⁶² See “Lindsay Assails Nixon on Housing,” *New York Times*, June 10, 1970.

⁶³ Velez was head of the anti-poverty agency, Hunts Point Multi-Service Center; Amy Betances managed the urban renewal office on the Upper West Side. In 1970 Badillo became the first Puerto Rican elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, from the 21st District in the Bronx. He ran three times in Democratic Party primaries for mayor, served as Deputy Mayor for Koch’s first term; joined Republican Party tickets in 1993 and ran against Mayor Bloomberg in the Republican Party primary in 2001.

Badillo was appointed Commissioner of the newly-formed Department of Housing Relocation. As Commissioner until 1965 and Bronx Borough President from 1965 to 1970, he worked with real estate developers on an agenda of urban revitalization that many uprooted and vulnerable residents of Manhattan viewed as gentrification:

“As part of an overall plan by the government to keep both industry and the professional, administrative and managerial classes in the city, certain communities in Manhattan were selected to undergo a complete structural overhaul, and racial and class transformation.... Families were uprooted to make way for communities designed to attract professionals.... [L]ess than 10 percent [of uprooted families] were ‘granted’ their rights to a home in the newly built apartments.... Badillo operated not in defense of working class interests, but in defense of large corporations who [did not want to] lose their skilled employees to suburban jobs.” (*Obreros en Marcha*, vol. 1, no. 20, September 1976:8-9)

As community activist Dorothy Pitman Hughes commented in the documentary film, “Break and Enter,”⁶⁴ displacement by urban renewal targeted the poor because rents in new public units were too high for area residents. She complained that residents paid – through taxes and blood – for the War in Vietnam and for a national space exploration program while the city colluded behind their backs with private investors and speculators.

West Side Squatters’ Movement⁶⁵

The squatters’ movement in Manhattan’s Upper West Side and Morningside Heights erupted in the spring of 1970 when groups of residents seized and claimed possession of vacant buildings. Although the initial move-ins were more spontaneous than part of a deliberately planned strategy of an organized movement, anger and frustration over the city’s housing plan had been swelling for some months. As Meyer (2007) indicates as a motivational factor for momentum in social movements,

⁶⁴ Also known as “Rompiendo Puertas,” the film can be viewed at CUNY’s Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, or purchased from Third World Newsreel.

⁶⁵ Everyone I interviewed referred to the housing movement of 1970 in the Upper West Side as the squatters’ movement. I use the terms interchangeably.

institutional political processes had not produced positive results. The event that precipitated escalating protest (illustrating another component of movements noted by Tarrow 1998), was the death of a young boy, Jimmy Santos, from carbon monoxide poisoning in a first-floor apartment on West 106th Street. On the evening following the funeral street march held for the child, local anti-poverty and tenant advocate groups helped several dozen families break into nine sealed buildings designated for demolition on and around Columbus Avenue and the West 80s in the West Side Urban Renewal Area.⁶⁶ While squatters moved at night with crowbars to peel off the seals covering doors and windows, supporters cheered on the streets as furniture was moved through windows with ropes from the Santos residence into one of the closed buildings.

Piven's (2006) observation that potential power from below is exercised when people recognize their leverage and withdraw their cooperation from elite policies applies to these events. For years, tenants and advocates pleaded and negotiated with the city to alter its urban renewal plan. Residents withdrew cooperation by occupying buildings slated for demolition or abandoned by the city. As word of the action spread that month and the next, more families – mostly Puerto Rican and Dominican – joined “Operation Move-In.” Illustrating the importance of previously existing interpersonal relationships and networks (Freeman 1999; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001), local residents, together with veteran tenant and community agencies, facilitated the mobilization of support for the more defiant tactics. Though the formal organizations and institutions in the area, including Community Action, Inc., the Mid-West Side Community Corp., and several churches, did not initiate or lead the escalation, they provided essential material and moral support for the actions:

⁶⁶ See “Poor Families Taking Over Condemned Buildings,” *New York Times*, April 24, 1970.

“There was documentation of the vast amount of dislocation that had already occurred in that neighborhood and the reality that very few people had actually been able to return, despite all the struggle. That became the theme – that the city made these promises and we’re going to hold them to it. So, squatting was a logical development at a certain point, especially given the tenor of the times. The students were taking over the campuses in protest of the invasion of Cambodia; Jackson State and Kent State hit – Spring of 1970. The country was in ferment. Only a year and a half earlier we had the Columbia student takeovers and other student protests. Taking these buildings was almost the natural thing to do.” (Tom Gogan, 3/24/07)⁶⁷

Initially, the city threatened the squatters with forced eviction. Squads of maintenance workers were sent to apartments and buildings not yet occupied to break fixtures, to remove stoves, refrigerators and sinks, and to wreck electrical wiring in an effort to deter move-ins.⁶⁸ But the squatters refused to vacate the apartments. Two weeks after the initial occupations, the city reversed course, saying squatters would be allowed to stay temporarily but no further actions would be tolerated. New locks were put in and some fixtures were replaced. Operation Move-In, however, was in full swing.

In June 1970 the softball players who organized Friday night movies at the local sandlot joined the squatters by breaking the lock and prying open the door of a vacant storefront:

“I remember one of you guys came up with the idea of a storefront, because Operation Move-In was already functioning. They had taken over apartments. And we knew that the storefront [on Columbus and 88th Street] was empty. We moved in on a weekend and began to clean it up.” (Federico Lora, 6/18/04)

From the moment they took the storefront, neighborhood residents stopped in to meet the new group. Luis Ithier, for example, was curious:

⁶⁷ My thanks to Tom Gogan, who was a tenant advocate, organizer, and supporter of the squatters in the Upper West Side from 1968 to 1973, for helping me to understand the environment, the various organizations, and the key players in the squatters’ movement, and for sharing his assessment of the period.

⁶⁸ Stunning visuals of city mechanics wrecking good facilities in apartments, as well as police removing handcuffed squatters, including middle-aged women, are captured in “Break and Enter.”

“The day they broke into the storefront, I was coming from Under the Stairs [a local bar]. I’m hearing this commotion in front of the storefront. I knew all these guys. I thought it was going to be something like a social club. Many of the guys thought so too – Israel, Archie, John, Cuba, Cubita – to be quite honest.”
(Luis Itheir, 3/18/06)

As a public sector union employee, Luis was one of the few original members of El Comité who had prior political experience: “I was already involved with Congressman Ryan⁶⁹...and got involved with JFK’s election too.”

The group that squatted at 588 Columbus Avenue had no clear political agenda other than a vague idea that “the people” were justified in taking direct action against the political establishment to control their own destiny (*Unidad Latina*, vol. 3, no. 12, December 22, 1973). They were moved by the bravery of the families confronting the tactical police squads sent by the City when a building was taken and went as a group to each site to help defend the occupations.

“Nobody took over the storefront so that we could become a political organization. People were squatting. There was a lot of territory open to take.... We ourselves, our families, were affected by the housing situation and by Operation Move-In. Once we took the storefront, as squatters ourselves, we became part of that movement. But initially it was not organized.” (Carmen Martell, 6/18/04)

Within several weeks of opening, thirty or more individuals began meeting daily at the storefront to strategize about how to sustain the housing movement. The definition of “the people” seemed evident: it meant the poor, struggling families in their community who were mainly Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Blacks. But it did not include Puerto

⁶⁹ U.S. Congressman William Fitts Ryan represented what was then the 20th Congressional District in New York from 1960 to 1972. He is remembered as one of the most progressive legislators and civil rights activists of his time, and for his advocacy of workers’ rights, civil liberties, and the expansion of health care access for the poor. The Ryan Community Health Center, a not-for-profit, community-based facility established in 1967, stands today on the West Side as a tribute to the Congressman’s belief in health care as a right, not a privilege, offering multilingual, easy access to a broad array of health services.

Ricans in city government who betrayed the community by advocating the interests of real estate investors. They chose a name in Spanish – El Comité – with little deliberation, though most of the group was English-dominant or bilingual.

While many individuals and groups who joined Operation Move-In were from the neighborhood, others were not. El Comité wanted to ensure that families who had already been moved out of the neighborhood or expected to be removed would have priority access to apartments in buildings that were taken over and to new public housing:

“We went to a meeting between Operation Move-In and Strycker’s Bay. The thing was that people from the West Side, people we knew, had been moved out. They were sent to the Bronx, Long Island, wherever. And some of the people coming in had nothing to do with the West Side. The West Side was Puerto Rican, Irish and a lot of Russians. In fact, the building in front of El Comité was the old Russian Embassy. So, Federico spoke at that meeting. And we asked, ‘who guarantees that whoever gets an apartment in these spaces is from here?’ We started getting apartments for the people who used to live here. We brought them back.” (Pedro Rentas, 6/18/04)

The influence El Comité garnered quickly among veteran activists and local residents was probably attributable to its social composition and outspoken insistence that the squatters’ movement should benefit needy residents before newcomers. The members and their families lived in West Side tenements and projects. Some had children who attended local schools. They tended to be older than the students from Columbia and the Young Lords from the other side of town (East Harlem) and matured, in some cases, by their military experience. Federico Lora emerged as an articulate and confident spokesperson. Though some were not Spanish dominant, they still communicated easily in Spanish and shared cultural bonds with Puerto Rican and Dominican residents. As Tom Gogan confirmed, English-only speakers, especially those who did not live in the neighborhood or had moved to New York only recently, did not have similar credibility.

Ana Juarbe, a long-time resident of the West Side and secretary at Columbia University when she became involved with the squatters, recalled her first impression of El Comité:

“We used to have women’s groups as squatters on W. 111th Street.... I was in awe of these articulate, strong, intelligent, leadership roles. The way they carried themselves.... I really wasn’t political...but, my goodness, all these Latinos were like a breath of fresh air. They were so untraditional; they weren’t ghetto. When there were takeovers, all kinds of people would come on the scene. I remember asking, ‘who are these people?’ That’s the first time I saw the people from El Comité.” (Ana Juarbe, 4/8/06)

Motivated by the desire to protect the interests of local residents previously displaced or awaiting eviction at meetings of tenant advocacy and anti-poverty agencies, El Comité became a principal force within Operation Move-In:

“We decided we wanted to confront the housing situation in a more organized fashion.... [W]e started planning which buildings should be taken over, which families should go here or there. We became more organized, rather than spontaneous.” (Carmen Martell, 6/18/04)

One scholar’s account of tenant movement history in New York City makes exactly that point about the West Side squatters:

“Ad hoc move-ins occurred on West 15th Street in Greenwich Village (sic) and on 111th and 122nd Streets.... But squatting became more systematic on West 87th Street and along Columbus Avenue, where buildings awaited luxury conversion or demolition for middle-income high rises as part of the West Side Urban Renewal. At night, blacks and Puerto Ricans, prying open boarded-up entrances and rigging makeshift living arrangements, presented the city with a fait accompli – either recognize their ‘ownership’ or evict whole families in front of press photographers. Eventually, the Columbus Avenue Operation Move-In claimed one hundred participating families... (and) were supported by elaborate networks...”⁷⁰ (Schwartz 1986, 23)

⁷⁰ The reference to West 15th Street in Greenwich Village appears in the author’s text; however, since West 15th Street lies just beyond Village boundaries in Chelsea, it is possible the author meant West 13th where, in fact, takeovers also occurred, or inadvertently referred to the occupied building at 233 West 15th St. as the Village.

Actually, the West Side squatters grew to over 200 families on the night of July 25, 1970, when 54 families, including 120 children, occupied two privately-owned buildings earmarked for demolition on Amsterdam Avenue and West 112th Street in Morningside Heights.⁷¹ The two buildings and four others were scheduled for demolition to make way for a luxury nursing home to be built by Morningside, Inc., a non-profit corporation connected to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.⁷² Six hundred residents had been evicted from the six buildings in the past few years. Operation Move-In, of which El Comité was now a part, provided the organizers of the action with a 300-person waiting list of families living in overcrowded and unsafe conditions and interested in squatting. Student organizers went door-to-door visiting families in the Manhattan Valley neighborhood to mobilize those willing to move into the buildings. The morning following the takeover, the squatters and supporters greeted churchgoers with news of the occupation. Though St. John the Divine, sitting directly across from the buildings, officially denounced the occupation, out of the church walked “Episcopalians for the Poor,” pledging their support for the action.⁷³

For the next few weeks, students in the “Urban Brigade,” mainly Latinos from Columbia University and Barnard College, and community activists met in the occupied buildings with squatters and mobilized support throughout the West Side. Forty-seven

⁷¹ See “Squatter Movement Grows as Housing Protest Tactic,” “Squatters Occupy Flats on West Side,” and “Squatters Score Nearby Wrecking,” in *New York Times*, July 22, July 26, and August 1, 1970, respectively.

⁷² According to a *New York Times* report, “Squatters Occupy Flats on West Side,” July 26, 1970, the Episcopal Diocese owned eight buildings on the block, including the six to be demolished to make way for Morningside House (eventually built on one of the Diocese’s sites in the Bronx). The pastor of the Cathedral sat on the Board of Directors of Morningside, Inc.

⁷³ Tom Gogan, who was present for these events, noted that “Episcopalians for the Poor” included Marie Runyon, now a ninety-plus-year-old member of the well-known anti-Iraq war group, “Grannies for Peace.”

community organizations citywide endorsed the actions.⁷⁴ On the Sunday morning a week after the occupation, Father David García, a radical priest from the Lower East Side, led a sidewalk Mass with squatters and supporters.

“Lindsay would not move against those takeovers because of the community support. Do you think he would have hesitated if the community opposed this? No way. How would that have looked to the constituents he wanted to appeal to? It was a very strong, very liberal (except the newcomers) area. Don’t forget, Congressman William Fitts Ryan represented the district; Bella Abzug became Congresswoman in 1971; there were huge anti-war rallies there in the late 60s. When poor people, working class people, people of color took direct action, a lot of people said, ‘Yeah, ok, we have to support them.’ This was not the Upper East Side.” (Tom Gogan, 3/24/07)

For nearly ten years, Morningside, Inc. tried to repossess the two occupied buildings through the courts, until Judge Bruce Wright threw the case out in 1979, and eventually turned the buildings over to the city.⁷⁵ The squatters obtained leases from the city (and eventually ownership) to apartments in those two buildings, making it the first successful “squat” up to that point on private property.

In the remaining months of 1970 and well into 1971, El Comité’s members attended meetings and rallies at St. Gregory’s Church where Federico Lora often spoke. Activists from El Comité joined door-to-door leafleting to rally residents to resist displacement. Manuel Ortiz led the occupation of a building on West 100th St. and West End Avenue (Manuel Ortiz, 8/1/06). Members appeared at every public opportunity to confront Betances, Badillo, and other city planners, about the abuse of low-income, minority residents. Badillo was jeered by crowds as “otro pillo” (another thief). When pressed to produce the list of families living in the South Bronx who had been removed

⁷⁴ See “Squatters Score Nearby Wrecking,” *New York Times*, August 1, 1970.

⁷⁵ See “For Squatters, Rent-Free Life Is Solution To High Costs,” *New York Times*, March 25, 1980. It appears that the other Morningside buildings were acquired by Amsterdam House, which completed a major expansion in 1998.

from the West Side, Badillo claimed the list had been misplaced or lost.⁷⁶ In response, on a fall afternoon in 1970, El Comité members informed the police precincts on West 82nd Street and West 100th Street that they planned a march to the Urban Renewal Office located directly across from their Columbus Avenue storefront. While several hundred people waited outside, spokespersons entered the office and asked the site manager to request a meeting with Badillo on their behalf.

When Badillo refused to meet, El Comité escalated the confrontation by disrupting the flow of commercial traffic. On a Friday in October at 4:30 p.m., the time when food delivery trucks came over the Triboro Bridge and down Columbus Avenue, protesters blocked the streets to prevent the trucks from passing. The action was repeated for several consecutive weeks, without police intervention; but Badillo never met with the group of protesters. In order to stop further demolitions planned for the Mitchell-Lama development, the movement stepped up the scale of building occupations by moving more families into vacant apartments and targeting the Mitchell-Lama development sites.

The Mitchell-Lama program, begun in the 1950s, provided city and state mortgage, tax, and rent subsidies to developers who would rent completed units to moderate-income earners. As in the Lincoln Center area, most of the families to be removed from the West Side to make way for high-rise buildings were low-income and could not expect to afford the rent in the new apartments. Occupancy rules for the one- and two-bedroom apartments limited the numbers of persons per apartment, thereby further disqualifying many families. Operation Move-In wanted the City's assurance that

⁷⁶ This claim was repeated in five separate interviews: by several founders in Puerto Rico; by Luis Ithier and Carmen Martell; by Manny Ortiz; Eulogio Ortiz and Maria Collado; and Tom Gogan.

it would support the position of Strycker's Bay and the Puerto Rican Citizens' Housing Committee report, reserving at least 30 percent of the Mitchell-Lama units for low-income residents previously removed or to be removed to make way for the development. "Site 30" of the Mitchell-Lama sites, on the west side of Columbus Avenue and West 90th Street, was chosen for the takeover.

Directly across the street, on the east side of Columbus Ave. and West 90th Street, squatters had previously entered a completed, but still vacant, Mitchell-Lama building, referred to as "Site 30," and were removed by police after several weeks. Occupancy by accepted Mitchell-Lama applicants was apparently delayed six months until March 1971 because of the takeover. According to one of the original Mitchell-Lama residents, Barbra Minch (who later supported El Comité in its bilingual education campaign), the new residents were split in their reaction to the squatters' actions. (Barbra Minch, 2/19/07) When the squatters at Site 30 sought support from the new residents across the street, the meeting held simply to decide whether to hear the squatters' position erupted into a physical fight between supporters and opponents.

It was not the first time conflicts arose between residents excluded from development plans and newcomers who benefited from thousands of subsidized units created by urban redevelopment. But when the occupation of Site 30 elicited the agreement with the City that 30 percent of Mitchell-Lama units still to be built would be guaranteed to low-income families, it seemed that the squatters had won another round. The city agreed to construct an additional 946 low-income and 1,117 middle-income

units in the West Side Urban Renewal Area but also vowed to evict future squatters from vacant buildings.⁷⁷

“We were able to get many families into the buildings we took over on 87th Street, many of whom are still there. We stopped demolition for Mitchell-Lama on Site 30 until the city agreed to meet the quota that 30 percent of all units would be reserved for low-income applicants.”
(Carmen Martell, 6/18/04)

Despite its verbal agreement, however, the City managed to reduce the proportion of low-income occupancy in Mitchell-Lama residences to well below the promised quota. According to Minch, one manipulative tactic on the city’s part was to seek and accept applicants such as law students whose long-term projected income far exceeded low-income eligibility guidelines. Another, according to Eulogio Ortiz and Maria Collado, was setting eligibility rules many displaced residents could not meet (Interview, 4/13/06). For example, a family of seven exceeded the occupancy limit for most of the new units. On the other end, a single person was eligible only for the few studios and not one-bedroom apartments. Also, the city played carrot-and-stick. They conceded more favorable terms for the Mitchell-Lama site than originally intended, and some buildings were transferred to squatters. Dozens of families were permitted to renovate, and rents remained stabilized. Many squatters, however, were taken out by city police. In November 1970, thirty individuals were removed from a building on West 87th Street and arrested (including Pedro Rentas of El Comité) by 50 members of the Tactical Patrol Force. The city said the squatters violated the oral agreement that no more families would move into buildings the city had emptied in preparation for demolition.⁷⁸ However, demonstrators at the site maintained that the building had not been sealed by the city

⁷⁷ See “Squatters Asked to Pay City Rents,” *New York Times*, June 14, 1971.

⁷⁸ See “Police Arrest 32 at Squatter Site,” *New York Times*, November 18, 1970.

because one old tenant remained and, therefore, squatters were not in violation of the agreement.

There were other counterattacks as well. The urban renewal plan created schisms not only in the Upper West Side but throughout the city between those who believed the squatters were justified and those who detested them. In a *New York Times* article, journalist David Shipler obtained the assessment of an unidentified representative of the real estate industry and local landlord:

“Puerto Ricans are not completely civilized – don’t quote me – how can a landlord have those people?”⁷⁹

The “brownstoners” in the Committee of Neighbors to Insure a Normal Urban Environment (CONTINUE), many of whom were new owner-renovators and middle- and upper-income professionals, viewed the squatters’ movement as a threat that would reduce the area to “a racially segregated slum.”⁸⁰ The group gained the attention of Deputy Mayor Richard Aurelio, Housing and Development Administrator Albert Walsh, and Relocation Commissioner Earl Rawlins by vowing to oppose any urban renewal plans that included subsidized housing for the poor. In its lawsuit to stop subsidized housing altogether, CONTINUE cited the “tipping” theory that too many poor people of color would exacerbate white flight and disinvestments. Though the lawsuit eventually failed, CONTINUE delayed and ultimately discouraged the city from building further publicly subsidized housing on the West Side. The luxury rental building built on the former Site 30 in the 1980s reduced to 20 percent the total number of units set aside for

⁷⁹ See “Shortage of Housing,” *New York Times*, August 10, 1970.

⁸⁰ See “Segregated Slum ‘Threat’ Fought on West Side,” *New York Times*, July 21, 1970.

“low- to moderate-income residents...’self-subsidized’ by the rents from the rest of the building....”⁸¹

Ironically, in the long-run segregation occurred, though not the type feared by CONTINUE. The city’s concessions to the housing movement gave activists partial but short-lived victories, effectively demobilizing the movement and paving the way for the gradual, wholesale gentrification of the West Side. In the wake of an institutionalized plan that catered to private developers and ignored the housing needs of the working class in New York City, segregation in the form of class and racial gentrification is evident throughout the West Side (and Manhattan) today.

Still, the power potential and short-term achievement of Operation Move-In lay in the risks taken by men and women, some quite young who led their own parents and siblings by the hand through dark hallways in the night, who for the moment withdrew their consent to allow the city to control their destiny. The relationship between the local political opportunity structure and participants’ actions further explains the movement’s power (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001; Tarrow 1998). The objective opportunities for broadening the movement beyond the initial takeovers, in a more coordinated and strategic fashion, derived from two factors: first, the prior Lincoln Center area development exposed the impact of the city’s urban renewal approach on low-income residents, damaging the credibility of political elites who extolled the virtues of the plan as win-win; second, the liberal mayoral administration vacillated on using police force as a response to illegal occupations.

⁸¹ See “About Real Estate; 2 Luxury Rentals Extend Columbus Ave. Renewal, *New York Times*, October 3, 1986.

The movement also benefited from the broad network of support developed by advocacy organizations and influential allies. Illustrating the effectiveness of networking by successful social movements, future Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger, State Assemblyman Albert Blumenthal, and State Senator Manfred Ohrenstein publicly denounced the city's urban renewal plans. Frequently shouting "power to the people," movement participants were energized by the alliances made with students, youth activists, and organizations around the city.⁸² Occupied buildings were designated as "liberated zones." The most successful were those that were cleaned out and set up with a community kitchen to accommodate people in apartments with no refrigerators or sinks because of the city rip-outs (Collado, 4/13/06).

The grassroots organizations such as El Comité and advocates such as Strycker's Bay Neighborhood Council did not initiate the movement or impose the anti-system perspective. In his study of west side urban renewal conducted prior to Operation Move-In and based partly on interviews of several hundred area residents, Lyford (1966) foreshadows the identity and anti-system frame of the movement in this way:

"[I] found myself categorizing people in very much the same way my respondents did.... He was one of 'the people' if he was making some sort of assertion in his own behalf, a demand on his society... Underlying the demand was an assumption that the system could deliver if it wanted to.... [T]he Spanish [sic] felt keenly that they were entitled to a place in the urban renewal community...even though the economics of the system made it plain that most of them would be ruled out."
(pp. xxiv-xxv)

One participant observed, however, that "El Comité's impact on housing was tremendous. For a time, we got poor, working people back into the community" (Nancy Colón, 4/15/06). Former members of El Comité, friends, and veterans of Operation

⁸² See footage in documentary film, "Break and Enter" ("Rompiendo Puertas").

Move-In still reside in the Upper West Side and Morningside Heights urban renewal areas, representing the last stronghold of subsidized renters or co-op owners of city-transferred properties in the area (Collado, 4/15/06; Martell 6/18/04). More than 19,000 working-class families were displaced by “urban removal” in Manhattan. Some still struggle for decent housing, health care, and education in areas such as the South Bronx, one of the poorest and most neglected urban regions in the United States today.⁸³

Clearly, no sustained victory for working class neighborhoods anywhere in Manhattan today may be claimed. Tenant mobilization subsided as the police became more aggressive and opportunities to expand the movement diminished. The compromises made with the squatters ultimately did not hold the city accountable to displaced families deceived by the promise that they would be able to return to their neighborhood to live in decent housing. By the time luxury housing was constructed on Site 30 of the West Side Urban Renewal Area, many of the organizations of Operation Move-In had dissipated and individuals dispersed. As numerous scholars have noted about the rise and fall of contentious movements (e.g., Giugni 2004; Klandermans 1994; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001; Piven 2006; Tarrow 1998), elites often defuse the momentum of or disperse a movement through a combination of compromise and repression, convincing activists they have achieved as much as possible without further risk, and causing divisions in the movement by offering gains to some and not others.

While the housing movement’s success may have been limited, its impact on El Comité was far-reaching. Illustrating another distinctive element of movements, the

⁸³ The media coverage of President Carter’s visit to the South Bronx on October 6, 1977, spotlighted the issue of urban housing decay and poverty with Katrina-like shock for at least several weeks following the visit. The *New York Times* called the area around Charlotte St. “a national symbol of what is wrong with urban America.” See Lee Dembart, “Carter Takes ‘Sobering’ Trip to South Bronx; Finds Hope,” *New York Times*, October 6, 1977.

tenuous and partial nature of victory affirmed the anti-system perspective along with the idea that “the people” can produce a formidable challenge to that system, which energized rather than demobilized the group:

“The struggle against urban renewal was never going to be won. But it created an urgent sense of need for community education and long-term organizing.” (Manuel Ortiz, 8/1/06)

EC became recognized on the West Side as a principled group, independent of elected leaders and anti-poverty agencies, with no hidden agenda or desire for acclaim. The group increased its contacts around the city, especially in the Lower East Side, the South Bronx, and among students who supported the squatters. They found that creating alliances and gaining institutional support from churches, storeowners, politicians, and student clubs had been vital to negotiating the city’s moratorium on evictions and restraint in arrests of squatters and supporters but were cautious about blanket trust of advocates.

The squatters’ movement also added to the sense of momentum and change throughout the neighborhood. In her personal account, Esperanza Martell described the mood on the Upper West Side:

“The West Side was a hotbed of struggle. All along the streets and avenues groups were setting up storefronts in vacant buildings.... There were lots of creative groups working with the community... a women’s center run by white radical feminists... Asians... [called] “Chickens Come Home to Roost,” a popular karate school [that] trained women and people of color in self-defense, ... the Nueva Canción [New Song] cultural center featuring Latin American protest music, [and] a community newspaper and food shop run by hippies. Even the middle class was opening their brownstones for political activities.” (1998: 179-80)

Because a large concentration of Puerto Ricans lived and participated in the squatters’ movement on the West Side, the Puerto Rican flag was a common sight on the

windows of some of the buildings. It is not unusual in the multiethnic New York environment to see flags of countries of origin displayed, especially to symbolize pride in an accomplishment of the home country or to celebrate heritage. But the symbolism of the Puerto Rican flag was political as well. The message was one of defiance and empowerment, and El Comité embraced the movement:

“At the time I was working at an architectural firm downtown and José Torres had published a column about Puerto Ricans, “Seeing Red,” and I read the column. At my job where drafts were made, you could enlarge things. So I enlarged the column on thick paper. We posted it in front of the storefront, and people began to read about Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans.... That’s how we came about. It had nothing to do with some of those things I read about.” (Federico Lora, 6/18/04)⁸⁴

Within several months of their formation, the group consciously set out to learn more about Puerto Rico’s revolutionary movement and the conditions that produced the migration to the United States. Their venture produced the transformation from community to Puerto Rican nationalist organization, which found further expression in a Latin American identity closely aligned with the struggles of other national minorities in the United States and democratic movements throughout Latin America and the world.

⁸⁴ Here, Lora refers to Juan González’ mischaracterization of El Comité in *Harvest of Empire* (2000): “By early 1970, some young Dominicans, following the example of Puerto Ricans who founded the Young Lords, started their own radical organization. It was called El Comité and it spearheaded a large tenant squatters’ movement on the Upper West Side against New York’s new urban renewal program....” (p. 125) González a founding member of the Young Lords, wrote that Dominicans were “more aware of politics than the average Puerto Rican or Mexican” and that the “upheavals of the post-Trujillo era had turned Dominicans into the most radical group of Spanish-speaking immigrants in U.S. History....” (p. 125) This, despite the fact that El Comité was comprised almost entirely of Puerto Ricans, displayed the Puerto Rican flag above its storefront door, collaborated with the Young Lords on numerous occasions (such as the 1971 Puerto Rican Day Parade), and changed its name to El Comité-Movimiento de Izquierda Nacional Puertorriqueño in 1975. Another founding member of the Young Lords, Pablo Guzmán (1980) wrote that El Comité was one of the three Puerto Rican organizations of the period. It is possible González’ error stems from the fact that Dominicans did participate in the squatters’ movement and Lora, the only Dominican in El Comité, was a leading figure. In any case, the mischaracterization points to the dearth of studies of the Puerto Rican politics of the period.

Puerto Rican Nationalism

Federico Lora, though Dominican by birth, was one of the original members, along with Pedro Rentas, to support the idea that El Comité should embrace the cause of independence for Puerto Rico. Federico's family left the Dominican Republic during the repressive Trujillo era and settled on West 99th Street. With no job or specific plans after high school, he enlisted in the Marines, was wounded twice in Vietnam, and achieved the rank of Sergeant. In letters to his wife from Vietnam, he talked about the high numbers of casualties of very young Puerto Ricans (from Puerto Rico). Upon his return in 1968, Federico and his family lived in the projects on Amsterdam Avenue:

“Carmen and I were in El Barrio with Richie [their son], and Antonio Irizarry was speaking about Albizu Campos and distributing a little book about him. I heard that speech and said, ‘hey, that old man was alright.’ And then we began to speak about independence. I would go to the marches against the war. The war in Vietnam was influencing all these people and little by little Puerto Ricans who were not active in the anti-war movement joined that movement.... We became influenced by all the people who came before us.” (Federico Lora, 6/18/04)

Although no formal structure had yet been established, by the summer of 1970 Federico Lora was recognized as one of El Comité's leaders and an effective organizer on the West Side. In fact, many former members attributed their association with the organization and the movement to their acquaintance with him. After attending the rally where he learned about Albizu Campos, Federico, an avid reader, decided to study Puerto Rico's history. He made his first visit to Puerto Rico that same year with Pedro Rentas, traveling around the island and learning about the independence movement. Based on their report after the trip, and on all the influences participants encountered personally and collectively up to that point, the organization established that it was “foremost, an independence organization” (Federico Lora, 6/18/04).

“At some point, we wanted to do more than get fair housing and education and eliminate the rats. We wanted to free Puerto Rico.... Between the moment we opened that front door to the moment we realized we were talking about freeing Puerto Rico, it was no more than a year.....By 1971, Américo [Badillo] was there, and he brought us further into our study of Puerto Rico. We talked about being Puerto Ricans and what that meant in this country. At first, we were all over the place. When Américo began to give us classes on the history of Puerto Rico, then we were political....”
(Maria Collado, 3/18/06)

Carmen Martell, though married at the time to Lora, did not immediately join El Comité because she wanted to learn more about the various organizations. The Movimiento Pro-Independencia (MPI) contributed greatly to her awareness of the political struggle in Puerto Rico and the colonial context in which mass migration from Puerto Rico had occurred. But she also felt distanced culturally from the island-based speakers she met at MPI presentations. Frank Vergara, from the Lower East Side, had a similar reaction to MPI and was drawn to El Comité:

“I was on the staff of the Frente [El Frente Unido] and once a month one of the organizations would talk to the staff. From the Frente, I saw how the people from EC behaved, and I found a real affinity with their way of being...down to earth, real clear, real humble, but smart.... That’s what I remember – smart.... Before long, I ended up in a study group. When I was asked to join, I was like, thank you. That’s when we started to have a real presence in education on the Lower East Side.” (Frank Vergara, 9/3/04)

The Young Lords attempted to recruit members of El Comité, inviting them to their meetings and trying to persuade them to become a Lords’ chapter. The Lords were respected for their militancy, and several early EC members credit the Lords as their political inspiration. Some attended Lords’ meetings and vice versa. Several of the Lords, in fact, joined El Comité. But El Comité wanted to maintain its independence. Its members tended to be older than the Lords and accustomed to different social behaviors.

Most importantly, by early 1971 the Lords had become interested primarily in Puerto Rico's liberation, and El Comité's members remained deeply entrenched in local community struggles:

“We always kept that link with the community. Most of the people who supported us didn't support independence. But they liked us because we were part of the struggles in the community. We were able to deal with the issues that affected the community, without bringing in Puerto Rico.” (Federico Lora, 6/18/04)

Though they did not merge, the two groups found many occasions to work together.⁸⁵ The first was the Puerto Rican Day Parade on June 13, 1971. Together with MPI, the Young Lords and El Comité objected to being placed as a contingent near the end of the parade by the parade's organizers and devised a plan to “take the front” at its starting point on Fifth Avenue and 59th Street. In advance of the date, *Unidad Latina* published a cryptic statement indicating that people should gather at 59th Street prior to the parade's starting time. The lengthy portion quoted from the article illuminates the passion and tenor of the movement:

“[What] are we celebrating?... We celebrate the deaths in our communities, those that destroy themselves, those that do not know the future. We celebrate the housing conditions, the lead poisoning of our children, poisoning that slowly puts them to sleep. We celebrate the long lines in search of a job or the monthly wait for a check. We celebrate those of us that have been murdered in jail. The drunkenness, the fights, the highs, and the long hours of work and...restless nights. The exorbitant rents and the cold winters, the radiators that don't work, the broken down mail boxes, the sirens and red lights...the clothing we make but cannot buy, the sewing needles in our fingers, the eyesight we slowly lose.... We celebrate our children that play in the streets, in brick and glass and stone; our workers that rise at dawn...those that understand about layoffs, about the boss and the Latino foreman that is worse than the American, and all the hard work that dissolves illusions.... All of these things we are going to celebrate on Fifth Avenue, that avenue that does not belong to us, that avenue that is a mock...of high rise

⁸⁵ Chapter 4 provides a fuller discussion of El Comité's involvement with Puerto Rico's independence movement, including its collaboration with the Lords and PSP.

luxurious apartments, built and maintained by our sweat, the sweat of the poor. An avenue where Blacks and Puerto Ricans are an exception. We march up an avenue of insult and indignity.... At one o'clock the police department begins to march. The same ones that protect the property of my landlord.... At one o'clock the politicians smile and begin to count the votes, while they forget...the budget cuts, the rent decontrol law, the poor health services.... They forget that it is [we], the poor, [who are] marching.... See you there: 12:30 at 59th and 5th." (*Unidad Latina*, vol. 1, no. 7, June 10-24, 1971)

According to the *New York Times* report, as approximately 800 to 1500 (sic) unarmed demonstrators marched to the head of the parade, "about 125 helmeted policemen pursued them, swinging clubs...and ran up and down the avenue and along the side streets grabbing the fleeing demonstrators."⁸⁶ Noel Colón of El Comité was among the twenty participants arrested for "inciting a riot." His companion, Maria Collado, staffing the Columbus Avenue storefront office for the day, gave birth to their son several hours after hearing of the arrests.

El Frente Unido (United Front) was a different type of collaboration between the between the Young Lords, MPI, the Puerto Rican Students Union, El Pueblo del Vladic from the Lower East Side, Resistencia Puertorriqueña, and El Comité, to raise the issue of colonialism and urge support for independence. Rather than the disruptive, media-grabbing symbolic tactic at the parade, El Frente held educational forums in neighborhoods throughout the city and on college campuses (Frank Vergara, 9/3/04). This was El Comité's first sustained undertaking beyond the West Side and provided a means through which new members were recruited and political involvement expanded, especially in education issues. Within one year, El Comité had become one of the three

⁸⁶ "19 Police Injured at Parade Here: 20 Arrested as Puerto Rican Groups Interrupt March in Protest Over Status," *New York Times*, June 14, 1971.

main Puerto Rican independence organizations in New York, characterizing itself as part of the “revolutionary left.”

Conclusion

While early members of El Comité may have become aware of Puerto Rico’s colonial dilemma through individual experiences, their living conditions and experience with racial categorization, discrimination, and exploitation were shared.⁸⁷ El Comité’s initial political identity was forged by national origin, family history, the racialized and class-based inequality encountered in New York City, and by the politicized environment of the period.

For years prior to 1970, tenants and their advocates in the Lincoln Center and Upper West Side areas urged the City to stop displacing thousands of families under the guise of “urban renewal” and to devise a plan instead to upgrade slum housing conditions for low-income residents. Only when hundreds of families on the West Side defied the City and private property owners by squatting in vacant buildings and cultivated the support of various social sectors and institutions were limited compromises reached. El Comité’s political development was conditioned both by the negative elite responses to the demand for quality, affordable housing as well as by the minor victories achieved through spontaneous and planned resistance.

The reaction of city government to the squatters’ movement reinforced the understanding that elected and appointed officials, Puerto Rican or not, did not represent their communities and that the excluded and powerless would have to represent themselves. El Comité provided leadership to that movement as mobilizers, coordinators,

⁸⁷As people of Taino, African and Spanish heritage, Puerto Rican immigrants found themselves racially categorized in New York first as “persons with Spanish surnames” and later as “Hispanic.”

and negotiators. The mobilizing frames of the movement resonated in the community with low-income Latino tenants and other sectors that supported them. In their study, Nepstad and Bob (2006) found that leadership influence was central to movements of subordinate groups in Nigeria against the Royal Dutch Shell oil company, in the Plowshares Movement against nuclear missile proliferation, and in the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico. Where there is elite vulnerability and strong organization, as in the civil rights movement between 1955 and 1970, McAdam (1982) suggests that the challenge confronting insurgents is most importantly one of “tactical innovation” – with no institutionalized power, challengers must find protest tactics that offset their powerlessness. The neighborhood housing movement provides a smaller lens than those focused on regional or national issues. But “leadership capital,” along with identity-sharing, structure of opportunities based on distribution of power, elite conflict and vulnerability, and alliance potentials, comprise a synthesis framework for understanding both the emergence and outcomes of powerful movements.

The severely gentrified environment today makes it hard to imagine the level and range of political and social activism in New York City neighborhoods in the late 1960s. Particularly in minority communities and on college campuses, people were motivated by the idea that “Third World” movements were needed to change local employment, education, and housing policies and to demand a non-imperialistic foreign policy. The politics that articulated the intersection of racial and class oppression in local, national, and international arenas, though never consolidated into one movement, nurtured an affinity with the people of Latin America, Africa, and Asia:

“Though there is a long history of organizing by leftists of color (García 1994; Kelley 1990; Yoneda 1983), the third-

World left of the late 1960s and 1970s was perhaps its most consolidated expression. Inspired by anticolonial revolutions, the US third-world left was an outgrowth of the black, Chicana/o, Puerto Rican, American Indian and Asian American power movements, all of which were antiracist and fairly nationalist.” (Pulido 2004, 764)

A qualitative leap in political awareness that occurs at a moment in time is difficult to capture. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the Civil Rights and anti-war movements claimed the attention of many young activists. As the Civil Rights Movement ebbed, the college campus provided the intellectual environment for scores of students that stimulated critical thinking about political and social injustice, racial oppression, and imperialism. For many young minorities in New York City, both on and off college campuses, anti-poverty and affirmative action programs helped to elevate the sense of entitlement as well as frustration with the limited positive outcomes of these programs. Some of the period’s activists turned to Democratic Party politics or continued to work with community agencies, funded by city, state or federal government, to implement service programs. Others, including El Comité, sought to answer the question of how subordinate sectors acquire meaningful power and fundamental change within a system that is structurally and institutionally designed to resist such change. During the next few years, El Comité studied the history of Puerto Rico, the experience of Puerto Ricans (and others) in the U.S., as well as Marxist political theory. Members questioned and debated the limited access to good jobs, the difficulties of joining and organizing unions, the divergent impact of the encroaching fiscal crisis on New York’s working class-communities, and U.S. imperialism in Puerto Rico and around the world.

As more activists drifted into the storefront, political action moved beyond housing and Puerto Rico to various local struggles. As Schneider (1997) observes about

the influence of Young Lords' activism on later movements in the Lower East Side, in the West Side in 1970 the success of the anti-system, democratic-rights' framing helped shape the way El Comité responded to new issues such as the campaign for bilingual education, where similar targets and alliance partners were identified and where tactics and discourse modeled those of the housing movement. The most significant outcome of El Comité's early political experience was its collective evolution from spontaneous reactor to conscious political actor.

CHAPTER 3

FROM COMMUNITY ORGANIZING TO POLITICAL ORGANIZATION: 1971-1975

Introduction

The demand for decent and affordable housing in New York City neighborhoods in the early 1970s represented an expansive view of democratic and civil rights, beyond the 1960s institutional emphasis on outlawing discrimination, legislating affirmative action, and expanding means-based social programs.⁸⁸ The notion that quality housing should be available to all had been embraced in such diverse quarters as the federal government, in the Housing Act of 1949, and the Black Panther Party, in its Ten Point Program.⁸⁹ Yet “urban renewal” plans removed thousands of people from their homes, with little concern for the disruptive consequences to families and communities or for ensuring quality alternative housing to displaced residents. The experience gained through the process of confronting elites in the squatters’ movement clarified for many activists the concrete ways in which racism and class domination permeated power structures (Aparicio 2006; Pulido 2004; Omi and Winant 1994).

It also motivated the activists in El Comité to develop what C. Wright Mills called the sociological imagination, meaning the analytical skills and will to understand the relationship between their individual and collective biographies and the history of

⁸⁸ For contrasting views of the impact of Black protest movements on civil rights legislation, see Wayne Santoro, “The Civil Rights Movement’s Struggle for Fair Employment: A ‘Dramatic-Events Conventional Politics’ Model,” *Social Forces*, vol. 81, no. 1, Sept. 2002: 177-206; and Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency 1930-1970*. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1982). Whereas McAdam views civil rights legislation through the lens of insurgency, Santoro concludes that contentious episodes explain the passage of legislation up to 1964, but that subsequent legislation was rooted more in conventional politics and public opinion.

⁸⁹ Point No. 4 stated, “We Want Decent Housing Fit for the Shelter of Human Beings. We believe that if the White Landlords will not give decent housing to our Black community, then the housing and the land should be made into cooperatives so that our community, with government aid, can build and make decent housing for its people.”

colonialism, migration, and the conditions of working people in capitalist society.⁹⁰ From 1971 to 1975 El Comité sought to understand how relations of power based on class, race, and national identity intersected to shape the conditions of Puerto Ricans, and to develop an organizational form and political program that responded to those conditions. Its perspective that Puerto Ricans in the United States should concentrate primarily on struggles for social change *in the United States* shaped the group's involvement in local democratic rights' struggles.⁹¹

While it initially identified itself as a community-based, Puerto Rican nationalist organization, through political experience and study, El Comité constructed a political identity as a Marxist-Leninist organization. That meant it embraced the analysis of capitalism as an exploitative and oppressive system in which workers' objective interests lie in a revolutionary transformation to socialism. Workers who understood their class interests – the advanced sector – would cultivate class consciousness and the revolutionary potential of the proletariat through propagandistic work among the masses of workers and through participation in the daily struggles of workers. [Lenin 1975 (1902)].

Chapter 3 considers EC's political development in the first half of the 1970s through an examination of the interaction of its internal processes and external activities.

⁹⁰ C.W. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959). See, also, City University of New York. History Task Force, *Labor Migration under Capitalism: The Puerto Rican Experience* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979).

⁹¹ See James M. Blaut and David Stea. "Are Puerto Ricans a 'National Minority'?" *Monthly Review*, vol. 29, no. 9 (1977): 35-55. For the various positions on the national question, see Puerto Rican Socialist Party, *Political Thesis of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party* (NACLA, 1975), and El Comité-MINP, *The Process of Puerto Rican Migration and the U.S. Working Class*, (1975) and "*Puerto Ricans and Proletarian Internationalism*" (1974). EC-MINP's pamphlets are in my personal archive, to be donated to CUNY's Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, following the deposit of this dissertation. Further references in this chapter to documents to be donated to the Center's archives are referenced with the acronym, "PATBDC."

In Part I, I argue that internal peer processes such as creating a structure, debating values and goals, developing a program for political education and a broader analysis of issues, and building propaganda skills and financial resources were instrumental in shaping the radical perspective of individual members and the group. In her study of the internal factors in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) that shaped “political consciousness, commitment, and organizational life,” Klatch observed, “Although people who enter social movement organizations typically already have formulated political beliefs, once they become active, their consciousness and political identity develop further through participation and interaction with peers” (2002, 187). In El Comité, the interaction included the entry of intellectuals and students into the organization, the exposure to other activists and revolutionaries, and the study of Marxism and revolutionary movements in Latin America, all of which contributed to the evolving political identity and transition to a Marxist-Leninist organization, El Comité-MINP, in 1975.

Part II looks at how local political opportunities, along with the influence of newly acquired ideas and political awareness, influenced the perspective or mobilizing frames El Comité (often in alliance with other groups) brought to local campaigns for democratic rights, as well as the outcomes. I argue that the democratic rights’ frame utilized in the prior housing movement resonated as well in struggles for bilingual education and cultural inclusion in the media, as EC continued to draw the attention of liberal allies to social inequality based on class and racialized national identity. The claim of a “right” to equal and quality education by the poor and working class attracted multi-ethnic allies who believed both in fairness and in celebrating rather than denigrating cultural diversity. The workers’ unity frame was effective in mobilizing Black and Puerto

Rican construction workers to fight for access to construction jobs in New York City, based on their common obstacles to job opportunities faced by minority workers. But the broader goal of multiethnic workers' unity proved elusive in the face of union exclusion of minorities and competition over scarce jobs. As participants learned through the confrontations seeking jobs for minorities, institutionalized racism kept working people on opposite sides of the issue⁹² (Cable and Mix 2003; Bluestone and Harrison 1990; Carmichael & Hamilton 1967). In community and workplace activism, the support of students, liberals, and (at times) sectors of the local power structure strengthened the claim-making and the claims of activists, which probably contributed to positive, though limited, outcomes.

The chapter demonstrates the dynamic of the collective in the construction of political identity in which multiple factors combine to produce a counterhegemonic ideology and perspective on resistance. The particular expression of that identity, as Marxism-Leninism, is explained by the esteem in which the model was held among the Left nationally and internationally in the period. While the consolidation of this perspective was a gradual process, occurring simultaneously with local political activism in this period, its implications for EC's political program and organizational trajectory unfold in the second half of the decade and are treated in the next chapter.

⁹² Comparative studies which explore institutionalized racism as impediments to multiethnic unity in Europe and in the Americas include, Steve Jefferys and Nouria Ouali, "Trade Unions and Racism in London, Brussels and Paris," *Industrial Relations Journal* vol. 38, no. 5 (2007): 406-422; John D.H. Downing, "Hemispheric Cultural Unity and the Denial of White Racism," Paper delivered at the Pan American Colloquium: Cultural Industries and Dialogue Between Civilizations in the Americas, University of Quebec, Montreal, April 22-24, 2002. In particular, Jefferys and Ouali argue there is a gap between national-level anti-racist policies and local-level union workplace practices.

Part I: Organizational and Ideological Development

Between 1971 and 1975, El Comité changed from an informal collective with members mainly from the Upper West Side neighborhood to a structured Marxist-Leninist cadre organization of five chapters – in Upper Manhattan, the Bronx, Lower East Side, Long Island, and Boston -- with strict recruitment policies, levels of membership, and leadership bodies typical of revolutionary organizations and communist parties following the Soviet/Cuban models.⁹³ Three major factors contributed to EC's ideological transformation: the decision to pursue a program of political study influenced partly by the entry of intellectuals; its view of Puerto Ricans as a national minority; and the growing acquaintance with other Marxist movements, especially from Latin America.

Composition and Structure

A main source of recruitment to El Comité in its first year was its Columbus Avenue storefront. With the Puerto Rican flag flying symbolically above the front door, most people who stopped in to find out about the new group were Puerto Rican.⁹⁴ Some thought it was a social club; others were simply curious. (Luis Ithier, 3/18/06) They were greeted by the "O.D." (the person with "office duty" for the day) who explained the group's community activism around quality-of-life issues and support for independence

⁹³ In its "Guidelines on the Organizational Structure of Communist Parties, on the Methods and Context of Their Work," the Third Congress of the Comintern 1921 asserted that there was "no absolutely correct organized form for communist parties." However, it stressed democratic centralism, the "synthesis" of centralism and democracy, as the essential guiding principle, with authority concentrated in central leadership that must be seen by the membership as "objectively justified strengthening and development of their work and fighting power." In this view, democracy is realized through "reciprocity" between leading bodies and membership.

⁹⁴ Many studies have noted the use of flags, popular art, and music as expressions of defiance. See, for example, Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii. *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Shifra M. Goldman, "The Iconography of Chicano Self-Determination: Race, Ethnicity, and Class," *Art Journal*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (Summer 1990): 167-173; and Rebecca E. Klatch, "Of Meanings and Masters: Political Symbolism and Symbolic Action," *Polity*, vol. 21, no. 1 (Autumn 1988): 137-154. In the Puerto Rican case, it is important to recall that displaying the flag was forbidden in Puerto Rico after the passage of "La Ley de la Mordaza" (the Gag Law) in 1948.

of Puerto Rico. Eulogio Ortiz, who grew up in Bedford-Stuyvesant and lived on W. 83rd Street, was attracted by the community appeal:

“I was walking up Columbus Avenue, recently divorced, out of work, and going through a very low period. I was just curious when I walked into the storefront and met Orlando [Colón], who gave me his schpiel. I was apolitical, but learned how El Comité grew out of a community struggle. I found that interesting – helping Puerto Ricans. That’s how I got into El Comité. It wasn’t a political organization in the sense of Marxism-Leninism. It was just community and independence for Puerto Rico.” (Eulogio Ortiz, 4/13/06)

Others joined in a similarly informal manner. They were recruited by friends, spouses, or through a conversation at a rally or on a picket line. Some had been squatters at Site 30, or anti-war activists, or pro-independence. Maria Collado was born in New York City of parents who migrated from Puerto Rico in the early 1940s. She quit high school after giving birth to her first child and moved to the Bronx with her mother, siblings, and daughter when they were removed by the city from their West 101st Street apartment. Though she had previously encountered the Young Lords, Maria chose to join El Comité because “it was more real”:

“I first met the Lords at Lincoln Hospital where I took my daughter. Their organization was a group of very young kids. I was young too but more mature. When I joined El Comité, I was 21 – the youngest, I think, in the organization.” (Maria Collado, 8/2/04)

The fact that the Young Lords was comprised of young people – teenagers in some cases, with many students among them – speaks to their courage and militant resolve to improve conditions in their neighborhoods and to speak out against colonialism and imperialism.⁹⁵ Their social composition, however, deterred those who believed in their goals but did not feel that joining the Lords was a good fit. The same applied to individual choices not to

⁹⁵ The composition of the Young Lords is discussed in Melendez, *We Took the Streets*, and in the documentary, “*Pa’lante*.”

join other organizations of the Puerto Rican Left that former EC members felt were “too island-based” and which probably influenced their later decision to identify principally with radical movements in the United States, while supporting independence for Puerto Rico.⁹⁶ El Comité provided an alternative for working people who were a bit older, some with children, to participate in political action. (Martell 7/31/04; Vergara 9/3/04; Collado 8/2/04)

In several cases, small groups already formed merged with El Comité. While growing up in Puerto Rico, Manuel Ortiz was influenced by his uncles, who participated as independentistas in the 1950 rebellions.⁹⁷ He first came to the U.S. when he joined Puerto Rico’s National Guard and was assigned to training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina:

“Some guy, the first sergeant, would say, ‘All Puerto Rican personnel line up. You better keep your noses clean because you’re all cowards,’ and this and that. It’s true we had people joining the Guard to avoid Vietnam... Back in Puerto Rico, I went AWOL from the Guard, hanging around, unemployed, and my father asked me if I wanted to come to live with him in New York. When I got there, my stepmother bought me a white shirt, pants, white shoes and socks, and announced, ‘I bought you that because now you are an orderly.’” (Manuel Ortiz, 8/1/06)

At Columbus Hospital on East 109th Street, Manuel often discussed the colonial issue with older nationalist co-workers and with his stepbrother, Willie. While living in Upper Manhattan, Willie, Manuel, and their friends formed a group, “Hijos de Boricua” (Sons and Daughters of Puerto Rico) around the time Operation Move-In was gaining

⁹⁶ Discussed later in this Chapter in section on “Revisiting Identity.”

⁹⁷ In this interview, Ortiz related an interesting complexity in his extended family’s politics in the 1930s. While some family members were pro-independence, others who were socialists favored statehood because they believed mainland and island workers should unite in “proletarian unity” against capitalism.

momentum.⁹⁸ The group met Federico Lora and Esperanza Martell, joined mobilizations in support of the squatters, and then merged with El Comité (Manuel Ortiz, 8/1/06).

Orlando Colón, whose brother Noel was one of the original softball players, joined in 1971 upon his release from the Marine Corps:

“My brother was hanging out with these guys, and they were already doing stuff with the community. And my brother would invite me to some of those things. I went as an outside observer, a bystander, because I was still in the military and had questions about getting involved in these types of activities while in the military. When I got out, I went to Fordham and met Américo [Badillo] who was teaching Puerto Rican history and had a progressive background. I told him that we had this group in Manhattan, and maybe he could come down. When he met the folks, he liked what he saw and began to get involved.” (Orlando Colón, 6/18/04)

Américo Badillo was the first “intellectual” to join the organization. Raised in Puerto Rico, he belonged to a Jesuit youth organization and later joined the Partido Independentista de Puerto Rico (PIP) before coming to New York to study and teach at Fordham University. With a different socioeconomic background than most of the original members of El Comité, he frequently referred to himself as “petty bourgeois” and was one of the pivotal voices in the organization stressing the need for theoretical and historical study.⁹⁹ Judging from the fact that several interviewees attributed their early “theoretical development” to him when discussing the role of political education, Badillo was a significant addition (Colón 6/18/04; Lora 6/18/04; Martell 7/31/04). With experience as a college instructor, he undertook the task of teaching Puerto Rican history. As Martell noted, for many members this was their first formal class, taught in Spanish,

⁹⁸ Ortiz said “Hijos de Boricua” had about 20 members; I had no other source to verify the number.

⁹⁹ Badillo could not be interviewed for this project because he currently resides in the Dominican Republic. I rely here on recollections of interviewees and on my observations as a participant in his class on the History of Puerto Rico at the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA) in Manhattan in 1976.

which challenged those who were functionally bilingual but had never engaged in intellectual discourse in Spanish (Carmen Martell, 7/31/04).

Students came to the organization as well in the early years and themselves became recruiters. On most campuses in the city, including high schools, students were rallying, striking, and taking over buildings to protest issues ranging from the War in Southeast Asia (and the killing of Kent State and Jackson State students) to local tuition hikes.¹⁰⁰ Many Puerto Rican students were attracted to pro-independence activities as well. As the organization acquired greater visibility, through the squatters' movement and public speeches at local rallies, EC recruited students to study groups, many of whom eventually became affiliated with the organization. Elizabeth Figueroa, Victor Quintana, and several others joined from Lehman College, as did students from City College and Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) where Carmen Martell worked as a secretary. Members also joined from the campuses of Brooklyn College and Columbia University (Edgardo Lopez Ferrer, 6/18/04; Sandra Trujillo 4/8/06; Orlando Colón, 6/18/04).

Until 1975, there was only one White participant in El Comité (Kathe Karlson, 5/12/06; Kathy Gruber, 11/9/07). Kathe Karlson, a longtime friend of early members, was the first to be recruited in 1973. Since 1959, Karlson's family lived in the projects across from St. Mary's Church on West 126th St. in Manhattan. Her parents were once members of the Communist Party and blacklisted in New York in the 1950s, causing her mother,

¹⁰⁰ For a small local sample, see the following in the *New York Times*: "100 Puerto Ricans Disrupt College; Protesters Barricade Doors at School in the Bronx," February 18, 1970; "City University Students Boycott Classes; Thousands Attending Night Courses Protest Fees," 3/18/70; "Columbia Rebels Fail in Protest," 3/12/70; "60 Students Seize Fieldson," 3/24/70; "Protesters Disrupt Class at Hunter," 4/9/70; "College Turmoil Continues Here; Baruch Classes Off," 4/18/70; "Aides Try to End Fordham Strike," 4/19/70; "75 NYU Students Protest at Club," 4/25/70; "City High Schools Join in Protests; Thousands Here React to Cambodia and Kent State," 5/7/70, et al.

Dr. Janet Karlson, to lose her job as a public school principal. Her father was a machinist and union organizer. Though why her parents left the Party in the early 1960s is unclear, Karlson suspects it was related to her mother's involvement in community work, "which the Party probably would have viewed as reformist."¹⁰¹ As a "red-diaper baby," she attended the 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington and anti-war demonstrations with her mother and closest friends, including Esperanza Martell.¹⁰² At the age of 14, she met Esperanza, along with Carmen Martell and Federico Lora, while hanging out at a local community center and playground:

"I knew Carmen and Fred when they were first married and when Fred went to Vietnam. They would joke around and make fun of me because I always brought up the political discussion. I said, 'Fred, why are you going to Vietnam?' But [Vietnam] probably helped politicize him. When he came back, we continued our political discussions." (Kathe Karlson, 5/12/06)¹⁰³

In the summer of 1970, Kathe and Esperanza went on the third Venceremos Brigade to Cuba; upon their return, Esperanza and several others of their close friends, joined El Comité:

"I wasn't in it because at that time, in the early 1970s, began this national identity movement across the country. In many ways, it was very valuable and important in history, but it was not something that Espy, Mercedes [another EC member], and I knew how to handle. We had been like sisters... We lived together...but we ended up separating as a result of not knowing how to handle it." (Kathe Karlson, 5/12/06)

¹⁰¹ In the 1940s and 1950s, Dr. Janet Karlson was involved in the movement of women who entered the workforce during and after World War II trying to get public daycare services for their children. In subsequent years, she worked in youth services in Harlem.

¹⁰² In her personal account, Esperanza Martell also credits Karlson's mother with exposing her to the anti-War movement (Martell 1998).

¹⁰³ The "it" that Karlson and her friends had difficulty handling was the passion of political movements organized around national identity, which excluded or discouraged participation of other nationalities, especially Whites. In this case, of course, she refers specifically to her friends' participation in the new, primarily Puerto Rican, group, El Comité.

When she moved to Brooklyn after graduating from CCNY, Kathe stayed involved with anti-war activists in Park Slope and invited Federico Lora to speak to the group about the work EC was doing in the Puerto Rican community. Following his talk, their political dialogue continued:

“Federico approached me about working with El Comité. It put me through tremendous changes. I said, ‘why would you want me? I’m White, not Puerto Rican.’ I just came out of this very bruising situation [with Espy], not completely understanding it on the personal level, but really understanding that it was something that needed to happen politically, even though it hurt in the heart. Where I grew up in the projects, I remember hearing conversations, being with people in a group and having [a police] officer say, ‘what is a girl like you doing here?’ knowing that was an insult not just to me but to the friends I was with.”
(Kathe Karlson, 5/12/06)

Karlson joined EC in 1973; no other Whites entered until after the Formative Assembly in 1975 “when it opened up” (Kathy Gruber, 11/9/06). The “opening up” indicates the point at which El Comité decided that there was no contradiction in including dedicated individuals from grassroots mobilizations who shared the goal of contributing to a multiethnic/multiracial working class movement in the United States. Between 1975 and 1978, several other Whites were recruited through community or student protests. Toward the end of the decade when El Comité became more involved in solidarity movements and the national party-building dialogue of the Left, several more Whites joined the organization.¹⁰⁴

It may be rare, but not unique, for an organization with a particular racial or national identity to include members from other sectors. A founding member of the Young Lords in New York City, Denise Oliver, was African American.¹⁰⁵ The inclusion of several whites in El Comité occurred at first not only because the group had a new

¹⁰⁴ The “party-building” movement is discussed in Chapter 4.

¹⁰⁵ See documentary, “*Pa'lante*.”

view of its primary goal, but simply because of the coincidence between individual biographies and EC's politics. Karlson, for example, viewed herself as "bicultural" as well as a communist. After the initial nationalist period, ethnic difference was not a source of tension in the organization. In its last years, however, when further integration had occurred, political dilemmas arose that some former members believed may have been rooted in the difficulty of achieving consensus among people with different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds.¹⁰⁶

By the mid-1970s, core members numbered between 50 to 60 and about 100 to 150 affiliates and sympathizers.¹⁰⁷ While the initial structure consisted simply of a base of members and an elected steering committee, with no formal rules or criteria for membership, members were expected to attend weekly meetings, to be involved in the political campaigns of the organization, and to participate in political education classes. Not everyone who joined the organization in 1970 chose to stay. Some people took a leave of absence after a few years; others resigned, often because of family and work obligations and certainly depending on the level of commitment each individual wanted to make (Luis Itheir, 3/18/06). However, many of those who left continued to participate with El Comité in protest actions or at the annual "giras" (picnics).¹⁰⁸

Giras and other social gatherings such as dances, street theater, and concerts were integral parts not only of the organization's cultural life but of its political project. As in

¹⁰⁶ The question of how ethnic and racial integration may have affected EC-MINP politically in its last years is explored in Chapter 5. Also see, Interview with four EC members in Velázquez (1998).

¹⁰⁷ I received similar approximations from most of my interviewees and observed sessions of cadres and plenary sessions at the First Assembly in 1978, but have no other way to verify numbers. Written records of cadres were not kept by EC.

¹⁰⁸ In interviews I was told that approximately 400 people on eight to ten buses were often taken to rallies in Washington, D.C., but these numbers could not be verified.

other cultures, family, food, music, and dance are central to Puerto Rican life.¹⁰⁹ The gatherings provided opportunities to talk politics in informal settings. They gave family and friends occasions to meet El Comité as a group and for the group to welcome new members. Members sold tickets to meet the cost of buses that carted the entourage to parks in Long Island or Upstate New York. The politics on these days came through the conversations at picnic tables, distribution of leaflets, political songs, and invitations to future activities.¹¹⁰

“Morality” Issues

Some of the most difficult collective challenges El Comité faced arose in the process of examining behavioral norms and customs ordinarily associated with personal choice or with dominant cultural and political values of their larger community and society, including religious practices, parenting, gender oppression, and alcohol and drug use. If the group wanted to project itself as a serious proponent of social change, what rules should guide public and private behavior? Was it ok to smoke pot or to tolerate members pursuing relationships outside of a monogamous family unit? Were men equally responsible as women for child care? Their growing social and political awareness led the women and men in El Comité to question every aspect of personal and family life and the behaviors commonly relegated to the private versus public sphere.

¹⁰⁹ For studies that address the importance of these cultural components among Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and other Latin Americans, see Torres-Saillant, Silvio and Ramona Hernández. *The Dominican Americans*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998; Delgado, Celeste Fraser and José Estéban Muñoz, eds. *Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latin/o America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997.

¹¹⁰ The view that cultural activities were political opportunities came across in most of my interviews. Social gatherings among political activists associated with Latin American movements were frequently held in New York City in the 1970s at Casa de las Americas on West 14th Street. The issues of *Obreros en Marcha* are filled with announcements of cultural celebrations of well-known socialist commemorations, such as International Working Women’s Day and May Day, and of historical events associated with Puerto Rico’s independence movement. Especially following the Chilean coup in 1973, solidarity networks such as NICH sponsored monthly Chilean peñas to support resistance movements in Chile.

These debates arose at first spontaneously through the collective interaction and were eventually influenced particularly by Che Guevara's notions of "revolutionary morality" and the importance of education in generating socialist consciousness and practice and by the persistence of the women who held men accountable for chauvinistic attitudes that kept them in subordinate positions at home and in political work.¹¹¹ On the "woman question," participants faced dilemmas shaped as much by tradition as by changing social conditions.¹¹² Chauvinistic attitudes in traditional home environments persisted on the one hand; on the other, sexual "openness" was a legacy of the 1960s. Several men in the organization reported their delight with the open reception they reported receiving in larger circles of political activists but had greater difficulty adjusting to new standards in their homes:

"The problem was, on the one side, I had to be the wife of Noel and, on the other side, I had to be this revolutionary. We had to play an important role in the community and then come home and take care of the kids and cook. I had to figure out who was going to babysit when we had to go to a meeting." (Maria Collado, 4/13/06)

Members, especially the men, listened in full membership meetings to criticisms that often came from the women, but sometimes from other men, about domestic expectations and disrespectful and condescending attitudes toward women. In many instances, some of

¹¹¹ For Che's views on education and "revolutionary humanism" and his influence on Latin American revolutionary movements, McLaren, Peter. *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire and the Pedagogy of Revolution*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2000; Petras, James. "Che Guevara and Contemporary Revolutionary Movements," *Latin American Perspectives*, Issue 101, Vol. 25 No. 4, July 1998: 9-18; and Lowi, Michael. "Che's Revolutionary Humanism," *Monthly Review*, vol. 49 (October 1997): 1-7.

¹¹² On the leadership roles of women in Latin American revolutionary movements and the internal struggles against gender oppression, see Ilja A. Luciak, *After the Revolution: Gender & Democracy in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); and Margaret Randall and Lynda Yanz. *Sandino's Daughters: Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle*. Rev. ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995). On the shortcomings of revolutionary movements in addressing gender oppression, see Margaret Randall, *Gathering Rage: The Failure of Twentieth Century Revolutions to Develop a Feminist Agenda* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1992).

the men staunchly advocated the need for more enlightened and respectful behavior in relationships (Nelson Gómez, 4/20/06; Orlando Colón, 6/18/04).

“We became very involved with the anti-war movement, which meant the white left.... You have to put things in context. This is the left, everyone’s flower people.... As a single male, being part of the left was the best thing.... But at our meetings, I would get my share of criticism [from the women]...sometimes for hours.” (Eulogio Ortiz, 4/13/06)

EC established a Women’s Commission to structure discussions about how to facilitate the participation of women in the organization and in political activism. Women were expected to take leadership roles in the community and the organization and to ensure that the dialogue continued on issues of particular concern to women:

“Part of what we did in the Women’s Commission was to try to build ourselves up. We read Engels on the Origins of the Family, State, and Private Property and tried to relate to it. There was a need to encourage ourselves to do what we were doing; to participate and to prepare ourselves to be spokespeople when we were assigned to go some place. We were always frightened and nervous. Studying the woman question allowed us to push ourselves and to deal with our fears.” (Kathe Karlson, 5/12/06)

The Women’s Commission pushed EC to create a nurturing environment for children as well and, in practical terms, to establish a day care system at political events the organization sponsored.

“[The involvement in housing and education] is how we first developed a sense of humanity. Our children were part of the organization. In order for us to go to the meetings, somebody had to take care of the kids. And we would all do that. Without anybody teaching us about the ‘socialist man or woman,’ we started doing it. We did not start out by studying theory and consciously setting out to implement it. On the contrary, our theory developed through the relationships, the human relationships that evolved day-to-day as we dealt with issues that affected the community. That was not contrary to Marxism; it reaffirmed Marxism. We learned that later on.” (Federico Lora, 6/18/04)

Internal discussions frequently focused on the tensions generated by political work in families and other personal relationships. For new political activists attending meetings three or four nights a week and activities on weekends, or staying out all night trying to get the newspaper ready for delivery to the printer, the strains on families were acute, especially when only one person in the family was involved. Religion was also a source of debate. In one instance, a member and spouse planned a religious celebration of the birth of their child and invited members of the organization to attend. The local chapter discussed whether attending the celebration would be viewed as sanctioning the church authority. The wisdom of supporting the family prevailed, but the incident shows the desire people had to question all traditional practices and to make informed choices. Recalling this episode, Pedro Cordero from the Lower East Side offered this reflective insight:

“Today we would say that wasn’t even a healthy conversation. It involved questions of trust and loyalty. But it’s part of the conversation we have as people involved in the process of change. We can’t talk about changing externally when we cannot change internally. It’s all part of those debates.” (Pedro Cordero, 5/4/06)

A difficult subject that was avoided, unintentionally according to some accounts and intentionally according to others, was sexual orientation. As early as November 1971, in response to a reader’s letter, *Unidad Latina* published a self-criticism for using the word “effeminate” to describe a male prosecutor at the trial of prisoners.¹¹³ Yet, in its fourteen years, the organization never officially condemned discrimination of gays or advocated for gay and lesbian rights. As Aponte-Parés and Merced point out, radical Puerto Rican politics in the seventies was immersed in “the issues of colonial status, nationalism, and socialism,” and “the center of gravity of [emerging identity] was located

¹¹³ *Unidad Latina*, vol. 1 no. 18 (Nov. 19-Dec. 3 1971): 10

in the cultural and community-development arenas.” (1998, 297-298) Though gays and lesbians participated in the organization, and in some cases same-sex couples lived together, several participants have pondered in retrospect whether an undercurrent of homophobia existed within the organization.¹¹⁴

El Comité gradually developed a cadre policy that represented its interpretation of “revolutionary morality.”¹¹⁵ Members were expected to conduct themselves with dignity and respect in relationships and restraint with regard to alcohol. Drug use was discouraged as a lazy, “lumpen” behavior that would discredit them in the larger community (Carmen Martell, 7/31/04). These conduct codes were viewed as an integral part of political strategy for several reasons. First, the group understood that the behavior of individual members would partly influence how the larger community judged its politics. Second, the standard view was that the “personal was political” and therefore struggles against oppression should occur in all arenas. Finally, credibility in the community and in all areas of one’s life was understood as vital to the internal security of the organization. The local or national government was not to be given any opportunity to discredit, infiltrate, or disrupt the activities of the organization through careless behaviors of members.¹¹⁶

The central tenet of constructing a counterhegemonic “morality” was that the individual was accountable to the community for his and her treatment of others and vice

¹¹⁴ Homophobia, to the extent it may have existed, was not exclusive to El Comité, according to Aponte-Parés and Merced. Nor was it as extreme as these scholars indicate existed in Left organizations in Puerto Rico, where “any hint at being [gay] was grounds for discipline or even dismissal” (1998, 359). For a historical and comparative account of the treatment of gays by the Cuban state and society, see Ian Lumsden, *Machos, Maricones, and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

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¹¹⁶ FBI surveillance of the Puerto Rican radical organizations and activists is discussed more fully later in the chapter.

versa, contrasted by the dominant view that one should rely first and foremost on individual judgment in “private issues.” Bellah, et al. (1985) discuss the irony of the mainstream version of individual freedom, or what they call “bureaucratic individualism,” in its conformity to existing authority:

“In bureaucratic individualism, the ambiguities and contradictions of individualism are frighteningly revealed, as freedom to make private decisions is bought at the cost of turning over most public decisions to bureaucratic managers and experts. A bureaucratic individualism in which the consent of the governed, the first demand of modern enlightened individualism, has been abandoned in all but form, illustrates the tendency of individualism to destroy its own conditions.” (150)

The prospect and practice of accountability to the collective challenged both men and women. If an individual wanted to attend school, change jobs, or move, he or she would want input from the group as to how to reconcile personal desires with the interests of the group or the revolutionary project. If a couple had relationship problems, especially if the work was affected in any way, the matter was placed on the organization’s agenda. Individual conduct was interpreted partly as a reflection of political development. Based on accounts of individuals who spoke to these issues (and asked not to be identified) and on my observations, there is no doubt that subjecting one’s personal life to collective scrutiny was difficult, and sometimes viewed as intrusive.

In the context of a democratically run collective in which membership is voluntary, group recommendations on these issues may be received as helpful or “constructive” criticism. However, the democratic centralist structure eventually adopted entailed a strict code of enforcement of decisions. Although personal matters were typically discussed and resolved in local chapters, some issues were sent to the Central Committee with the local unit’s recommendations. A cadre who chose not to comply with

the Central Committee's decision might ask for reconsideration. But this did not frequently occur either because leaders were respected, adherence to their decisions was expected, or members were intimidated by the authority of rank. Reluctance to comply with decisions made about individual life paths sometimes caused members to leave or, in extreme situations, to be expelled.¹¹⁷

Formal Political Study

When Américo Badillo joined the organization in early 1971, political education in the form of structured study groups began in earnest. But there were other influences that motivated EC's members to study revolutionary theory and movements. By late 1970, the quest to know more about the history and political situation of Puerto Rico sent Federico Lora and Pedro Rentas to Puerto Rico and other members and friends to the activities of MPI and the Young Lords. Also, through its Upper West Side location and the friendships with other Latinos, EC became acquainted with Dominican revolutionary movements (e.g., the Movimiento Popular Dominicano, MPD), with the Cuban Revolution, and with a larger network of Latin American movements through the Third World Coalition (TWC).¹¹⁸ Petras argues that one of Che Guevara's influences was the idea prevalent in contemporary Latin American revolutionary movements "to recruit intellectuals to serve the movement rather than become self-appointed vanguards" (1998, 16). According to one intellectual who joined EC in these early years, the group provided a welcoming environment with "great humility and sensitivity" without elevating

¹¹⁷ Dilemmas of the cadre structure and democratic centralism are further discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

¹¹⁸ The "International Solidarity" Discussion Paper prepared for the First Assembly in 1978 documented the history of EC's early relationships with Latin American movements, as did early issues of *Unidad Latina*, all PATBDC.

intellectuals above its own “organic intellect.” (Edgardo López Ferrer, 6/18/04, author’s trans. from Spanish)

“When we began to study Marxism, we studied Marxism for real. It was not about the speeches. Our study groups were real study groups. We lost a lot of people – by we, I mean ‘the movement’ – who became Republicans and Democrats, or whatever. [But] most of the people who went through El Comité, one way or the other, have continued to struggle wherever they are located. That’s important because we are getting to be 60 years old. That means the foundation was key. That’s something you don’t find enough of.” (Federico Lora, 6/18/04)

Implementing a program of political education had its difficulties in that levels of literacy and formal education varied. Former members talked about painstaking efforts to read aloud and to clarify passages from Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done?*, Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*, and *Labor’s Untold Story*. In an unpublished document recounting some of EC’s history in 1978, the Political Commission wrote:

“El Comité did not arise on a university campus nor was it formed by intellectuals, “red diaper” babies or even from the ranks of split-offs from other formations. All of its original members were from working class families, particularly of an oppressed nationality – Puerto Ricans. Some had never read a book from cover to cover, most had never seen a college classroom and nearly all had to struggle with the [dilemma] of having spoken Spanish at home, [having been] taught English in...school, pronouncing their Puerto Rican heritage, yet being hindered by their lack of skills in Spanish.”¹¹⁹

In one account by a self-described “non-intellectual,” a study group leader asked a student participant to interpret a passage from Marx’s *Capital, Vol. I*. The student (according to the imitation provided by the storyteller) provided an elaborate response. When the leader asked the non-student in the group if she understood the explanation, she

¹¹⁹ PATBDC.

laughed and said “not a word.” But she and others persevered and read many scholarly and popular books in the radical tradition (Confidential Interview).¹²⁰

“One of the things we did was to base political education on the least able person, not based on the students. We studied *What Is To Be Done* by breaking it down on the most basic levels. We did not leave people behind by intellectualizing. I’m not saying we didn’t lose people, because we did, and we made a bunch of mistakes. But today the people who did not come from a student background still remain very close to...the intellectuals in the organization. The people who were in the workers’ movement are still linked to...those who were the intellectuals in the organization.” (Orlando Colón, 6/18/04)

Political study was a weekly obligation, with reading assignments for the entire organization established by the “Political Education Commission.” Four to six members met with their mentor and alternated responsibility for leading the discussion. By the mid-seventies, the membership at all levels of affiliation participated in study groups through three city chapters and one on Long Island. Former members from Upper Manhattan and the Lower East Side traveled to Boston periodically for political study there (Colón 6/18/04; Vergara 9/3/04). Jeanette Suarez, who today is Assistant Principal in the Brentwood School District and an advocate for bilingual education in Suffolk County, spoke of the strain of the commitment on working people:

“At one point this was life. You don’t know distances on Long Island. But, from school [her job on Long Island], I would take Jaime to his factory job in Brooklyn, then go to Queens College, back to Brooklyn to pick him up, grab a quick sandwich, and then into Manhattan for PE [political education]. I would be falling asleep, and someone would...criticize me for being unprepared. On the way home, I cried.” (Jeanette Suarez, 9/25/04)

¹²⁰ At times in interview sessions, speakers gave permission for particular stories to be told but asked not to be identified as the source.

In his Farewell Speech in 1978, paying tribute to the qualities, including perseverance, many individuals brought to the organization, Federico Lora captured the empowering experience of political education:

“How can I forget the efforts of an individual who was pushed out of school in the ninth grade and today leads discussion groups on the philosophical works of Konstantinov, Lenin, and Harneker?”¹²¹

In addition to the internal classes, El Comité interacted with intellectuals and activists in various New York City forums, including the Cuban-sponsored Casa de las Americas, the North American Congress on Latin America, the Center for Cuban Studies, the Brecht Forum (now Marxist Center), and in local universities and union halls. From these associations developed long-term relationships with Left scholars and activists associated with *Monthly Review* and *The Guardian* newspaper. Two important mentors from the “Old Left” were Irving Kaplan and Annette Rubinstein.¹²² “Kappy” was characterized by Lora as “the greatest critic [of the] organization and...its firmest supporter”(Lora, Farewell Speech). Rubinstein gave writing lessons to small groups of five or six at a time. Writers were trained for six to eight months, and then a new group began. Thirty years later, veterans of those groups told me they still heard Annette’s voice when they wrote.

¹²¹ The Farewell Speech delivered at the 1978 First Assembly is discussed in Ch. 4, PATBDC

¹²² Irving Kaplan served in the Works Progress Administration’s National Research Project, investigating labor markets in the 1930s, and worked in various other capacities in the Roosevelt Administration. After World War II, he was an economic advisor to West Germany, and for decades thereafter a socialist activist and close adviser to EC-MINP. Annette Rubinstein, who died on June 20, 2007 at age 97, was an educator, author, and Left activist since the 1930s. A frequent contributor to *Monthly Review*, former librarian and high school principal, she was known also for her bid for State Assembly as American Labor Party candidate in 1949. For many years, she collaborated with U.S. Congressman Vito Marcantonio, later documenting his record in *I Vote My Conscience: Debates, Speeches and Writings of Vito Marcantonio* (New York: Vito Marcantonio Memorial, 1956). *Monthly Review*’s obituary for Dr. Rubinstein may be read at <http://www.monthlyreview.org/0607rubinstein.htm>.

Propaganda and Finances

Producing and distributing a newspaper was daunting for a small organization with few resources, but EC considered it an essential task of political activism.¹²³ EC's first newspaper, *Unidad Latina (UL)*, was published bi-weekly for mass, local consumption.¹²⁴ While some articles focused on the national political economy, colonialism in Puerto Rico, the war in Vietnam, and conditions throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, most dealt with local issues of immediate concern to Latinos and African Americans in New York City. The affinity with African Americans on a range of issues, including discrimination in hiring, police brutality, urban renewal policies, and the Rockefeller drug laws, was based in the corresponding racialized and class experiences of African Americans and Puerto Ricans and the desire to seek alliances around common interests. Toward the end of 1972 and through 1973, articles on workplace exclusion and rising unemployment among minorities in New York City appeared with greater frequency, reflecting the organizing campaigns and interests of members and immersion in class analysis. Over a period of seven months, in fourteen installments, *UL* ran a "political education series" which essentially attempted to popularize Marx's *Capital, Vol. I*. Before local chapters existed, all propaganda was prepared by a central Team. When chapters formed, these smaller units produced monthly bulletins that focused on issues and campaigns relevant to their communities. Eulogio Ortiz, who worked at PBS in New York City for thirty years first as an artistic assistant and later as an assistant director, trained people in layout and served as Head of Propaganda for several years:

"I went to the High School of Art and Design and then to Pratt Institute to study animation and advertising art. When I was a

¹²³ See similar position of Third Comintern, www.marxists.org/history/international/co.

¹²⁴ Give exact issues held at Tamiment; my collection PATBDC

senior in college, I worked in the Lindsay administration making maps. I also did free lance work for the New York Times doing layouts and for a Wall Street newspaper. Ten of us used to put together the lists of stocks and how much money they made. We got paid \$10 an hour, very good money then.... I became in charge of the *Unidad Latina* for two reasons: one was my background and the other was that I had a car. The car was major because every Friday after everyone finished their thing on the paper at 3 a.m., I went to New Jersey to get it printed. And then back the next day to pick it up. So what I had to offer El Comité was my graphics background and the car. Well, the car and then the graphics.” (Eulogio Ortiz, 4/13/06)

While newspaper printing was done in New Jersey, printers and mimeograph machines had to be sought locally for leaflets and bulletins:

“St. Mark’s Church [on 2nd Avenue and East 10th St.] had a printing press they allowed groups to use. Once I spent 10 hours, overnight, printing 500 leaflets for a demonstration. Why did it take 10 hours to print 500 leaflets? Well, the...machine was broken. It printed, it didn’t print, it printed. I finally got 2 boxes worth. Pedro [Rentas] was sent to pick me up. Here I am walking towards 2nd Avenue at 6 in the morning dragging these two boxes. I sit on the sidewalk like a homeless man with these boxes that I’m going to protect with my life. All I remember next is Pedro waking me up, laughing.” (Eulogio Ortiz, 4/13/06)

Newspaper distribution took place every Saturday, usually from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

– at first, exclusively in the Upper West Side and gradually throughout New York City, and in neighborhoods in Long Island, Boston, Camden, and Philadelphia.

“I showed up that first Saturday morning at 8 a.m., and Nelson [Gómez] was opening the office. And I waited and waited. Nilsa, who I never met before, came in at 9 a.m. with these fatigues, and I think, ‘yeah, I’m in the right place; this is the revolution.’ You know, you had these romanticized notions in those days. She started interrogating me, ‘who are you, brother?’ I say, ‘I’m supposed to meet Orlando here to sell some newspapers.’ ‘Ok, here you go.’ So out I went with Eulogio walking uptown on Amsterdam with 50 papers. I didn’t even read it. All I knew was it [was] about the revolution, about independence for Puerto Rico. At this point in my life, I’m running 10, 12 miles a day. I sold 150 papers that day, mine and Eulogio’s and more from the office.” (Jaime Suárez, 9/25/04)¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Jaime Suárez was an accomplished track athlete in high school.

At first, people were encouraged but not required to participate in Saturday distribution. When the group adopted its cadre structure, distribution became mandatory for full members, and others were encouraged to participate.¹²⁶ As one former member from the Lower East Side recalled, “We grew up in the projects while distributing those papers” (Angel, 1/10/08).

In 1973 El Comité announced the start of a two-year period of transition to develop “a political organization clearly identified with Puerto Rico’s struggle for national liberation” and suspended publication of *UL* for six months to allow more time to reflect on accumulated political experience and the questions emerging about political identity (*UL*, vol. 3, no. 12, Dec. 22, 1973). In resuming the publication of a monthly paper with the name, *Obreros en Marcha* (*OEM*, trans. “*Workers on the Move*”),¹²⁷ beginning in 1974 and ending with the last issue in 1982, the duality of El Comité’s politics became more apparent. Most articles linked local issues and reform campaigns to the national political economy and the objective of building a multinational, class-based revolutionary movement in the United States.

Both *UL* and *OEM* were distributed free of charge. Recipients were asked for donations, so that by the end of Saturday distribution, everyone’s pockets were loaded with nickels, dimes, and quarters. This meant, however, that the organization had to raise money from other sources to print the paper and to take care of all other operational expenses. No effective organization can survive without financial resources, but members had no experience raising money and seeking government or foundation funding

¹²⁶ One important influence on this and other “full cadre” policies was *Notes on Cadre Formation*, written by Chile’s *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionario* (MIR), published by Resistance Publications in 1974.

¹²⁷ specify which issues held at which libraries; my collection PATBDC.

contradicted their radical politics. For the most part, participants survived on modest or low incomes. The “tithe” was a ten percent contribution of net income made by full members to cover costs for utilities, propaganda, political events, and travel. As the organization matured, fundraisers became more sophisticated. But the day-to-day expenses of running the organization were paid by members’ dues.

Revisiting Identity

The “National Question”

While political and cultural nationalism remained strong throughout El Comité’s history, members confronted difficult questions about national identity as they studied Marx and Lenin. Were Puerto Ricans to fight racist discrimination but leave issues of class to other workers in the United States? How should Puerto Ricans in the United States relate to the movement against colonialism in Puerto Rico?

The answers came in the form of EC’s position that Puerto Ricans in the United States constituted a predominantly working-class national minority, in contrast to the view of the PSP that Puerto Ricans in the United States were part of a divided nation and therefore an integral part of the island’s national liberation movement. The organization shared its perspective in 1974 in its booklet, *“The Process of Puerto Rican Migration and the U.S. Working Class”*:

“As a migrant group, Puerto Ricans in the U.S. have left their nation of origin and have become incorporated into the socio-economic structure of another nation. The material reality of Puerto Ricans in the United States...[is that] of North American capitalist society.... Puerto Ricans participate in the economic, social, political, and even cultural life of this country.... [They] are predominantly a working class people, a national group whose majority belong to the working class of the U.S.... [A]s one generation follows another, the assimilation of elements of the proletarian and dominant culture becomes more pronounced.” (11)

In this analysis, Puerto Ricans in the U.S. constituted a nationality developing in the U.S. with features that increasingly distinguished it from workers in Puerto Rico.¹²⁸ To view them as part of a “divided nation” would treat the concept of nation as a “spiritual” entity based on the “sense of nationality.”¹²⁹ The experience of Puerto Rican workers was distinguished from that of the working class in general by the racial and nationality-based discrimination that produced a standard of living inferior to that of a significant portion of White workers, but similar to that of Black and other “third-world” minority workers. Low wages, high unemployment, workplace harassment, and poor housing, health care, and education strengthened the sense of unity among Puerto Ricans.¹³⁰ Similar to the views of other national-identity based Left organizations (Aparicio 2006; Pulido 2006), EC identified racism and national chauvinism as impediments to class unity, which strengthened bonds of national identity and objectively provided a basis for “third world unity” among minorities to confront those conditions and ideology. The political strategy became articulated in a duality of purpose: On the one side was the intention to contribute toward a unified workers’ movement in the United States; on the other, the plan to press for the expansion of democratic rights.

El Comité was not alone in questioning the implications of colonialism, migration, and racialized experiences for resistance. In the dialogue over what became known as the “national question,” PSP characterized Puerto Ricans in the United States as “forced residents” whose long-term interests lie in Puerto Rico’s independence and

¹²⁸ The word “ethnicity” is more commonly used today in the social science literature to express the concept of nationality-based identity. I use the words interchangeably.

¹²⁹ El Comité-MINP, “Puerto Ricans in the U.S.: Nation or Nationality?” in *Puerto Ricans and Proletarian Internationalism* (October 1974): 9-12.

¹³⁰ *ibid.*

socialist movement. As part of a “divided nation,” Puerto Ricans in the United States should organize primarily to advance Puerto Rico’s liberation struggle.¹³¹ Both organizations believed their positive were grounded in objective analyses of that material interests of Puerto Ricans in the United States that validated their political programs. Consequently, especially in the mid-1970s, the two organizations often engaged in sectarian and nuanced debates, with little input from the communities they sought to influence. Still, in many political campaigns, activists from both organizations working closely together to achieve common objectives.

Formative Assembly: El Comité-MINP

By the mid-1970s, El Comité’s position on the “national question” appeared in *Obreros en Marcha* and took shape in the founding of the Frente Obrero Unido (FOU, trans. United Workers’ Front). At its “Formative Assembly” in January 1975, the organization formally decided that, while continuing to support the independence of Puerto Rico, it would struggle for socialism in the United States. EC decided to focus on several areas of activism in the next period: internal political education; organizational restructuring; local workers’ and students’ movements; and regular dialogue with other U.S.-based Marxist organizations. The worker and student sectors would attempt to transcend the constraints of ethnic identity by seeking unity among minorities in local struggles and, where possible, with Whites.

The Assembly also approved the name change from El Comité to El Comité-MINP (Movimiento de Izquierda Nacional Puertorriqueño, trans. “Puerto Rican National Left Movement”). Placing “Puerto Rican” in the name signified the intent to retain its

¹³¹ PSP, *Official Thesis of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party*; For accounts of tensions within the U.S. Branch of the PSP, see Cruz (1998:108, 118-119); for accounts that speak to the tensions within the PSP on this issue, see Torres & Velazquez

identity as political actors in Puerto Rican communities (Nelson Gómez, 4/20/06). “National Movement” was to convey the idea that the movement for socialism was ultimately national, not local. The removal of the emblem of the Puerto Rican flag with the slogan, “La patria es valor y sacrificio,” from the front cover of *OEM* was symbolic of the transition from a nationalist to a socialist organization.

Though it acknowledged its community roots as its strength, El Comité-MINP members believed that their immersion in the Puerto Rican/Latino and minority experience in New York constrained their understanding of the diversity in and complexities of workers’ and activists’ experiences around the country.¹³² One objective of pursuing a dialogue with other Left organizations was to share experiences that would help to deepen their collective analysis of workers’ conditions and to find common ground on which to build a unified political agenda (Elbaum 2002). In the second part of the decade, that dialogue became known as the “party-building” movement.¹³³

Formalizing Structure: The “Cadre Organization”

Most importantly, the Formative Assembly implemented a “cadre” organizational structure, based in the principles of democratic centralism, learned not only from the study of Leninism and the Soviet/Cuban models of communist parties but also from its affinity with Latin American revolutionary movements, including the Movimiento Socialista Puertorriqueño (MSP, trans. Puerto Rican Socialist Movement) of Puerto Rico, the Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR, trans. Revolutionary Left Movement) of Chile, and the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores (Workers’

¹³² “El Comité-MINP/Its Formative Assembly,” *OEM*, vol. 1, no. 5 (April 15, 1975): 3, 8.

¹³³ The party-building movement is discussed in Chapter 4.

Revolutionary Party) of Argentina, among others.¹³⁴ The two most important criteria for membership in the cadre organization were strict adherence to the “political line” of the organization” and acceptance of democratic centralism. As Lenin put it:

“The principle of democratic centralism and autonomy for local party organizations implies universal and full freedom to criticize, so long as this does not disturb the unity of a defined action; it rules out all criticism which disrupts or makes difficult unity of action decided upon by the party.” (Lenin, cited in Le Blanc 1993)¹³⁵

Though MINP did not consider itself the “vanguard party” to which Lenin refers, it embraced the principle of “unity of action” was embraced nonetheless, meaning that once a decision was made by the Assembly, individuals were not to criticize the organization’s actions to non-members. In theory, the “Assembly,” comprised of full members, was the highest deliberative body. It met periodically (once every few years) for several days or weeks to formulate and approve a general program for the ensuing period. Local chapters met weekly to discuss internal affairs, tactics and strategies of members’ political work, and political studies. Full members and affiliates attended chapter meetings; sympathizers met periodically with a study group leader from the local chapter. The Central Committee, elected by the Assembly, met more frequently (usually monthly) to review and respond to reports from the separate chapters and other units and to prepare evaluations of the work of the organization for the membership. The Political

¹³⁴ This information is taken from the history of developing relationships with Latin American movements provided by MINP in its assessment of “International Solidarity,” written in preparation for the First Assembly in 1978. Pulido (2006) observes similar influences on the cadre organizations in Los Angeles as does Elbuam (2002).

¹³⁵ Paul LeBlanc, a scholar, self-proclaimed Trotskyist, and former member of the Socialist Workers’ Party, provides an elaborate and sympathetic explanation of Lenin’s conception of the vanguard party as a democratic representative of the working class, formed from within the working class, in his essay, “*Revolutionary Principles and Working-Class Democracy*,” online at the Global Document Index, The Trotskyist Encyclopedia, www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/fit/leninismus.htm. The quote is from page 7. Also see, Paul LeBlanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* (Humanity Books, 1993). For an interpretation of Leninism as a cult, see P. Siegel, et al., “Leninism as cult: the Democratic Workers Party,” *Socialist Review*, vol. 17, no. 6 (November-December 1987): 59-85.

Commission, chosen by the Central Committee, was the highest leadership body and responsible for overseeing the implementation of the Assembly's mandates.

Between assemblies, the smaller units (chapters, commissions, sectors) submitted reports on their work to the Central Committee along with the results of deliberations put before them by the leadership. The Central Committee reviewed reports, conducted its own internal discussion, and provided the base with evaluations of organization-wide activities. Once an organizational position was reached through membership discussion and debate in the leading bodies, members were to set aside differences and collectively embrace the position of the organization. When the Central Committee assigned areas of work or specific tasks to the membership as a whole or to individuals, any member could object or disagree through his or her local chapter. Activists also sought advice on their political work from their chapters as well as from the leading bodies. However, in practice, members questioned few leadership decisions; communication between base and leadership was slow; and individuals sometimes became frustrated by what they felt was a lack of attention given by the leadership given to local political work (Emilio Morante, 5/3/07; Quintana, 9/25/04; Suarez 3/18/06).¹³⁶

It seemed clear to these activists that large numbers of people had to be mobilized for effective political action; but the hard work, level of commitment, and perspective needed for those actions to occur could not be expected on a mass level. The central aspect of the life of a cadre was the political movement; individuals became cadres over a period of time, as their commitment to political action deepened. Therefore, members were incorporated in stages that corresponded to that commitment. Full members or cadres committed themselves to the discipline of the democratic centralism, presumably

¹³⁶ These dilemmas are further discussed in Chapter 5.

acknowledging the risks to career and family pursuits. In the mid-1970s after the Formative Assembly, members read the pamphlet written by Vietnamese Communist Party leader LeDuan, “Some Present Tasks” and “Notes on Cadre Formation,” written by Chile’s MIR, both of which reinforced the importance of cadre discipline.¹³⁷

In one important respect, the more elaborate structure systematized communication. Local chapters were a logical outgrowth of expansion and facilitated membership communication in smaller units rather than as a large group at the storefront. The cadre organization’s emphasis on discipline and accountability was considered vital to internal security:

“One of the things that becoming a Marxist-Leninist organization gave us was the sense of security. People were being infiltrated, yes; but people were also killed. There were movements of people in our time that were wiped out. We all assumed that our organizations were infiltrated, and they were. But democratic centralism helped us.” (Kathe Karlson, 5/12/06)

Though the United States is not often characterized as openly repressive, revolutionaries of the 1970s believed their political views invited efforts by the state to discredit or split them apart. The Left of the 1970s knew the U.S. government spied on, infiltrated and disrupted their organizations, even though the vast majority engaged only in constitutionally protected political activities.¹³⁸ El Comité heeded the warnings about

¹³⁷ For a biographical view of cadre discipline among the Sandinistas, see Matilde Zimmermann, *Sandinista: Carlos Fonseca and the Nicaraguan Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

¹³⁸ On FBI surveillance, see Ramón Bosque-Pérez, “Political Persecution against Puerto Rican Anti-Colonial Activists in the Twentieth Century,” in *Puerto Rico Under Colonial Rule: Political Persecution and the Quest for Human Rights*, Bosque-Pérez and Colón Morera, eds. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006). For media coverage of recent revelations about the extent of FBI surveillance of activists in Puerto Rico and the United States, see Matthew Hay Brown, “Puerto Rico Files Show FBI’s Zeal; For Decades, Secret U.S. Dossiers Targeted Suspected,” *The Orlando Sentinel*, November 6, 2004. FBI files were obtained at Congressman José Serrano’s request of former FBI Director Louis Freeh who confirmed to the Congressman that the FBI had engaged in “egregious illegal action, maybe criminal action.” To date, 120,000 of 1.8 million pages of FBI files compiled during 20th century surveillance have been released to Congressman Serrano and are currently being catalogued by CUNY’s Center for Puerto

government infiltration by developing a system of tight security and strict criteria for full membership. Its “cadre policy” included rules governing the rights and responsibilities of the members and a structure for maintaining a secure environment. Cadre meetings were not publicized; internal documents on political strategies or organizational affairs were not shared with non-members; and not all members revealed their affiliation publicly (in workplaces, schools and community organizations).

The attention paid to internal security was intended to shield the organization from government infiltration, disruption of political actions, and illegal surveillance and harassment. Government surveillance was considered a dangerous threat to the operation of organizations identified with the Puerto Rican independence movement or socialism in general and prompted El Comité (and other similar groups) to try to insulate itself from these threats. As one of the elements of internal security, all members of the Central Committee were not known to the full membership of the organization, and full members became aware of the entire membership only when a full Assembly was convened. Members of one chapter in the structure were not to discuss the details of their work with members outside of that unit. The reasoning behind these rules was that if any one member was taken into government custody for interrogation, he or she would have limited information to provide, thereby minimizing the vulnerability of the organization.

Rican Studies. Researcher Bosque-Pérez found 100 FBI pages on himself alone covering his participation in anti-Vietnam War and pro-independence protests when he was a high school student.

Government Surveillance

“You never have to worry about a President being shot by Puerto Ricans or Mexicans. They don’t shoot very straight. But if they come at you with a knife, beware.” (J. Edgar Hoover, Director of FBI, 1964, quoted in Smith 2001, 151)

Government repression of political organizations, besides the repression of the labor movement and activists (actual or suspected) during the McCarthy period and civil rights movement, is a little discussed aspect of U.S. politics. The assumption persists today that political dissenters in this country enjoy broad freedoms to criticize public policy, to openly choose political affiliation, and to advocate alternatives to the dominant political and economic structures and institutions in the United States. But the assumption was not credible among the U.S. Left of the 1970s. Thousands of declassified and FOIA-retrieved FBI documents confirm that the concern of political radicals with government repression was not merely paranoia. The FBI’s Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) operated covertly from 1956 to 1976. Originally intended to “increase factionalism, cause disruptions and win defections” in the Communist Party of the United States, COINTELPRO expanded to twelve programs entailing the infiltration and sabotage of political activities of numerous organizations, including the Black Panthers, the New Left, and finally those affiliated with the Puerto Rican pro-independence movement.¹³⁹

COINTELPRO records show the FBI’s elaborate efforts to discredit and disrupt the Young Lords (later known as the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization –

¹³⁹ In November 1977, a lawsuit brought by several news reporters forced the FBI to release thousands of documents revealing the existence of the counterintelligence program directed against the Puerto Rican pro-independence movement and sectors of the North American Left. The findings are summarized in an unpublished (to my knowledge) document written by José Antonio Lugo, former (and now deceased) staff attorney of the Center for Constitutional Rights, entitled “Is Cointelpro Dead?: Consejo Puertorriqueño Por La Paz v. Federal Bureau of Investigation.” Center for Constitutional Rights staff attorneys represented the plaintiffs in the case.

PRRWO), the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, and El Comité-MINP, to name just a few of the program's targets. Initially, the FBI denied the long-term, covert operation of COINTELPRO, and the program did not cease until years after the FBI first faced charges of civil rights violations related to these activities. This conduct clearly indicates the government's perception that these organizations posed a grave threat to national security and U.S. interests at home and abroad even though sustainable evidence of criminal activity was never produced against any of their members.¹⁴⁰

In a 1976 report of a subcommittee of the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, Chairperson James Eastland wrote:

“Acts of terrorism and civil disobedience within the United States, designed to gain attention and support for the Puerto Rican independence movement, have increased in recent years....[This] Subcommittee established that Communist Cuba has taken an active role in support of Puerto Rican independence. During its continuing investigation of Puerto Rican terrorism, the subcommittee has learned that the Democratic People's Republic of China has taken an active interest in the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization, an underground, revolutionary, pro-independence group operating in the United States...dedicated to the overthrow of the government of the United States, and to the independence of Puerto Rico.¹⁴¹

The report provides no testimony supporting the claim of China's interest in PRRWO or the meaning of Cuba's "active role" in support of Puerto Rican independence. Innuendo, implication, and rhetoric substitute for precise clarification and evidence of wrongdoing.

If the Young Lords Organization was "underground," it did not hide well from public view. As Sánchez (2007) points out, the Lords skillfully used the media by

¹⁴⁰ FBI's Reading Room at its Washington, D.C. headquarters contains 52,680 pages on COINTELPRO, of which 1,190 are devoted to groups seeking Puerto Rican independence; 1,450 to what it calls "nationalities intelligence;") 6,244 to the New Left; and 482 on its Espionage Program. See footnote 151, same cites.

¹⁴¹ U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on the Judiciary, 94th Congress, Second Session. Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws: The Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976: v.

announcing their intention and then carrying through actions such as the takeover of a church in East Harlem and Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx. The Senate Committee's report identified by name the members of the organization, complete with detailed individual biographies, and dates and places of dozens of meetings attended over a period of several years. The FBI defined "subversive activities" as seizing church property or occupying a hospital or school, and demanding breakfast and day care programs, health care and "human dignity for welfare recipients."¹⁴² The Report's coverage of joint activities between the Young Lords and El Comité, and of over 100 organizations ranging from St. Teresa Welfare Mothers to the Playboy Foundation, demonstrates the intensity of surveillance. However, no specific charge or evidence of "terrorism" was brought against any member of the Puerto Rican pro-independence groups.

FBI documentation of surveillance of El Comité specifically was not obtained in time for this project.¹⁴³ Former members I interviewed were convinced that their suspicions about government spying and harassment were valid. On one occasion, files belonging to a trade union activist visiting from Puerto Rican were stolen from a member's van while the two shared dinner in a New York restaurant (Confidential Interview). The union activist had been picked up from the airport by the member of El Comité for a scheduled series of public conferences on government repression of the trade union movement in Puerto Rico. On another occasion, a member of El Comité identified a detective on special duty at the New York City Mayor's Office as a person

¹⁴² Subcommittee Report, pp. 21-23.

¹⁴³ In response to my FOIA request for files on El Comité, the FBI advised me that there were over 1,000 pages on Puerto Rican independence organizations which would be available to me for a fee. CUNY's Center for Puerto Rican Studies has obtained these files through a FOIA request made by Congressman José Serrano, and these files will be available to researchers.

who claimed to be unemployed and regularly attended meetings of the Vieques Support Network (Confidential Interview).

When four members of El Comité participated in a 130-member delegation from the United States to the Eleventh International Youth Festival in Cuba in 1978, FBI agents visited and questioned families and friends about the delegates' whereabouts. The Festival was publicized worldwide, with 20,000 delegates attending from 145 countries; the U.S. delegation itself provided the federal government with the names of the participants from the U.S. were provided to the federal government when the delegation requested permission to travel directly to Cuba (which was denied). Though the delegates' defiance of the travel ban (going to Cuba through Canada and returning through Jamaica) and their attendance at the festival were covered in major U.S. media,¹⁴⁴ the FBI did not mention the purpose of the visit to Cuba to those they questioned. In one case, an agent visited a delegate's apartment building superintendent, asking questions to which he knew the answers. One can only assume that the intent of the examiner was to create a cloud of suspicion and damage the credibility of his target with neighbors¹⁴⁵ (Confidential Interview). Several former members believe that government infiltration was a factor in the split that occurred in 1981; others dismissed the notion. (Confidential Interviews).

¹⁴⁴ See Alan Riding, "Politics Aside, Cuba is Festive for Visiting Young Leftists," *New York Times*, August 7, 1978, A2.

¹⁴⁵ Questions asked by the FBI agent included: Do you know where this person is right now? Did you see her removing anything from her apartment? Has she ever mentioned her affiliation with Fidel Castro and Cuba? Did she ever mention where she works? Have you ever noticed her doing anything suspicious? Has she vacated her apartment or told you when she is returning? Will you call us if you notice anything unusual about her behavior?

Part II: “Think Globally, Act Locally”: Struggles for Democratic Rights

In characterizing El Comité’s political program, Torres notes:

[El Comité] addressed the gamut of issues affecting the community, linking local issues to international forces. Years later, this notion, common to the Left, would be recycled in the slogan, ‘Think Globally, Act Locally.’ In the sixties and seventies, this was the normal mode of analysis for cadre organizations.” (1998, 8-9)

By 1971, the group had gained the trust of many local residents of the Upper West Side and was reaching into other neighborhoods initially through its Puerto Rico-related activities. Unlike anti-poverty agencies and politicians, they were not promising to deliver services or seeking votes for election. The closely-knit group that met at the Columbus Avenue storefront wanted to build on the momentum in the community by staking new claims in other arenas:

“At first, we decided we needed to do more for the community. People were having a lot of major problems – rat problems, health problems. Through that process, we started investigating and became versed in the laws and the conditions.” (Luis Ithier, 3/18/06)

EC’s political campaigns in the early 1970s sought jobs for minorities, bilingual education programs in local schools, more inclusive media programming, and the expansion of university curricula to include programs in Puerto Rican and Black Studies. These “democratic rights” frames exerted pressures at points of elite vulnerability, where the reality of exclusion most strikingly contradicted the rhetoric of equal opportunity and access. The limited gains of these campaigns, especially for bilingual education and against racist exclusion in the workplace, were immediately significant only to small groups of people. But in conjunction with the efforts of similar groups around the

country, they advanced the institutionalization of multicultural education and workplace access in the U.S.

Bilingual Education in District 3

“[T]he United States is one of the few countries in the world in which a man can consider himself educated and speak but one language, this despite the fact that the United States has probably been the outstanding country in receiving...millions of people who have spoken all of the modern languages of the world.”¹⁴⁶

“We wanted to free Puerto Rico; but we wanted to do it through the bilingual program.” (Maria Collado, 3/18/06)

The impetus for bilingual/bicultural education advocacy in New York City in the 1970s came in 1969 as part of the movement for “community control” of schools:

“Fed up with schools that ‘tracked’ their children, miseducated them, graduated them unable to read or write, and denied them their cultural identity, language and history, working people throughout the city (particularly in Black and Puerto Rican communities) demanded a public school system responsive to the needs of local communities and under the control of the parents and residents from those areas.” (*OEM*, vol. 1, no. 17, May-June 1976:11)

The New York City Decentralization Act created 32 school districts, each with its own board that advocates hoped would empower neighborhood parents in local schools. In the first few years of decentralization, a battle raged in the Lower East Side’s District 1, where the population was predominantly Black, Puerto Rican, and Asian, over school board elections. “Por Los Niños,” the slate of parents demographically representative of the community, was opposed by the UFT-sponsored slate of “candidates [who] were exclusively White, middle class, with no actual ties to the schools other than that their

¹⁴⁶ Joséph Monserrat, “Statement” at Hearings Before the Special Subcommittee on Bilingual Education on S.428, A Bill To Provide Assistance to Local Educational Agencies in Establishing Bilingual Education Programs, Monserrat Archives, box 8, folder 2, at CUNY’s Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College.

relatives had jobs in the schools as teachers.”¹⁴⁷ As part of their reform agenda, Lower East Side parents and advocates wanted bilingual education (Spanish-English and Chinese-English) in their District.

Initially, school principal (and later superintendent) Luis Fuentes supported the idea simply because parents wanted it. Subsequently, he became convinced that speaking in a familiar language empowered children, improving literacy and enhancing students’ interaction with their peers.¹⁴⁸ At the time, it should be remembered, the justification for bilingualism differed from that of today’s TESOL programs. Whereas the latter focuses on transitioning speakers of languages other than English to English-only instruction, bilingual/bicultural programs were conceived by academics and advocates as long-term programs of bilingual language immersion where literacy in two languages and diverse cultures could develop.¹⁴⁹ District 1 was first to offer a bilingual program in New York City in this period.

El Comité learned of the Lower East Side education struggles through El Frente Unido, the pro-independence coalition with the Young Lords and MPI, and from new recruits to the organization from that neighborhood. Inspired by the goals of bilingual education, they wanted to bring it to District 3 in the Upper West Side. Carmen Martell, Luis Ithier, and Maria Collado, all with children in P.S. 84, raised the issue of bilingual/bicultural education at PTA and local school board meetings. Many parents

¹⁴⁷ Quoted in Jennings and Chapman (1998:286).

¹⁴⁸ Jennings and Chapman (1998:285).

¹⁴⁹ ASPIRA, “Conference on Bilingual Education Report,” March 1973, in Monserrat Archives, box 10, folder 10; “Statement” (undated) by Joseph Monserrat, President of the Board of Education of New York City, to the Special Subcommittee on Bilingual Education, box 8, folder 2, in CUNY’s Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College.

were receptive to the idea, as were the principal of P.S. 84, Sid Morrison, and board member Diane Morales:

“We wanted our kids to be able to read and write Spanish. And we had the support of the teachers, especially the unemployed teachers who wanted to teach in a bilingual program. Puerto Ricans were a minority on the West Side, unlike the Lower East Side. But we were organized because of the housing issue. And Dominicans lived in the community as well who wanted their children to be taught in Spanish. So we had the support of part of the educational system, then the parents, and eventually the school board. The parents moved with us from one issue to the other. When we moved, we moved not as revolutionaries but as part of the community because we were part of the community.”
(Federico Lora, 6/18/04)

El Comité framed the campaign for bilingual/bicultural education as a struggle for quality education for all working people – in essence, a struggle for democratic rights.

They believed the New York City School Decentralization Law of 1969, passed ostensibly to increase community control, was designed by city government “to maintain, on the one hand, the existing educational structure (the Central Board in particular) and...to isolate, divide, and divert the progressive demands of the people.”¹⁵⁰ (*OEM*, vol. 1, no. 6, May 1975: 8). To activists, quality education meant the incorporation of bilingual education, nutrition and reading programs, and decent facilities, supplies, and instruction. The demand for quality education could not be satisfied merely through the creation of buffers between communities and school administrations. Bilingual/bicultural education represented a pedagogical philosophy on how to improve the literacy, cultural

¹⁵⁰ The claim does not seem far off-track, in light of the many instances in the decade when the Central School Board intervened to overrule a local school board. During the mid-70s fiscal crisis, for example, parents in several districts protested the decision to close schools at 2:15 twice a week rather than 3 p.m. (a provision negotiated by the UFT following its 1975 strike). In District 3, El Comité joined parents in a series of sit-ins that spread to ten schools and to District 6, convincing local boards to defy the Central Board’s order and dismiss children at 3 p.m. The Central Board overruled the policy. (“The Myth of Decentralization.” *OEM*, vol. 1, no. 17 May-June 1976: 8, 11)

awareness, and opportunities for children with strategies that concretely addressed their needs.

The victory for bilingual/bicultural education in District 3 was achieved through a broad-based community alliance, mobilizations, and disruptive tactics. From 1972 to 1973, El Comité brought parents to school board meetings, disrupted agendas by speaking out from the floor, demanded votes on the issue, and led pickets on the street. At one point, P.S. 84 was occupied for several days by parents who refused to allow classes to take place. On several occasions, the flow of traffic on local streets was halted by parent protesters. The atypical aspect of District 3's battle was the support cultivated among White parents, along with Latinos, based on the philosophy embraced in the Lower East Side and increasingly by advocates nationwide, including ASPIRA, Inc., that multicultural education enriched all children.¹⁵¹ Barbra Minch, a Mitchell-Lama resident originally from Brooklyn and sympathizer of El Comité since 1971, enrolled her daughter in the program, along with the children of members of EC, upon its inception in 1973:

“Monica and Richard [children of EC members] went from kindergarten through sixth grade in bilingual classes where the majority were white children.” (Carmen Martell, 3/18/06)

The program was unprecedented in New York City in that it was implemented district-wide, whereas District 1's program operated in one school. The victories empowered residents and bolstered El Comité's belief in creating tactical alliances with sympathetic sectors. MINP members pursued similar protest campaigns in Boston and Long Island later in the decade (Orlando Colón, 6/18/04; Jaime Suárez, 3/18/06).

¹⁵¹ Atypical in the general sense that bilingual education was supported by Whites in the District but not particularly unusual in District 3 given the history of progressive politics on the Upper West Side (excluding the role of CONTINUE in the battles against urban renewal).

In school districts around the country, academic interest in multiculturalism surged in the 1970s, seeming to affirm Glazer and Moynihan's [1970 (1963)] thesis that cultural pluralism better explained the prevailing mode of immigrant assimilation than the "melting pot" theory. The main premise was that ethnic and racial groups did not simply give up or reject their ethnic identity or language and melt into one homogenous American identity. Cultural pluralism was defined by scholars, and celebrated, as the unique capacity of the United States to appreciate many heritages. This reinterpretation of immigrant incorporation cited the universal embrace of the democratic ideal rather than the rejection of ancestral heritages as the unifying factor among diverse groups. When local budget cuts and creeping conservatism in the nation created a backlash against bilingual education and other affirmative action programs, political campaigns turned to defending rather than expanding these programs.

In the fog of today's conservative fears about bilingualism and Anglo-anxiety over the preservation of "American" culture and customs (Brimelow 1995; Huntington 2003), it is important to recall that the desire for bilingual education and cultural representation of Puerto Ricans in New York and Mexican Americans in Los Angeles was hardly without precedent. Generations of Jews, Italians, Germans, Irish, and African Americans fought in both public and private realms to ensure the endurance of their diverse heritages.¹⁵² More than a theory of immigrant incorporation, bilingual education has been integral to combating racism and to providing meaningful and equal education.

In a similar vein, in 1972 El Comité's anti-discrimination confrontations in New York City extended to the sphere of media for culturally representative programming and

¹⁵² See Douglas McGray, "Lost in America," *Foreign Policy* May/June 2006, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=3429

to the plight of gypsy cabs (“los taxis del pueblo”) for street pick-up licenses. As a result of a collaborative effort that included meetings with staff and executive board members, picket lines at Channel 13’s office at West 58th Street and Broadway, and finally a disruptive takeover of a live show, the executive board of PBS eventually agreed to fund and air the series, “*Realidades*,” focusing on the history, life, and culture of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos. (*UL*, vol. 2 no. 6 June 12-June 30, 1972: 3, 14):

“I signed the agreement with Channel 13, representing El Comité. The problem then was that there were few Latinos who knew television. People know film, but not television. I was still unemployed, and they [Ch. 13 board] asked me if I’d like to work as a production assistant on the show. I said sure, I’ll do it. We had a staff of six people and a budget of \$100,000, which is nothing. *Realidades*, a weekly half-hour program, lasted for three years.” (Eulogio Ortiz, 4/13/06)

Illustrating the broad reach of this and other protest campaigns by activists and allies, by the 1980s, Maria on Sesame Street was teaching Ernie and Elmo to count in Spanish.

Workplace Activism

“People had different ideas. Some of us believed our struggle was Puerto Rico. At the same time, the industrial workers thought labor was important. We began to read Marx and Lenin who told us that ‘los obreros’ [the workers] were the ones that were going to take the struggle to the next level.” (Maria Collado, 3/18/06)

Harrison and Bluestone (1990) observed that one of the impediments to labor unity in the 1970s and 1980s was the reproduction of historical racial and gender divisions through labor market segmentation. Besides a variety of corporate strategies for taming powerful industrial unions, class divisions were produced by seniority rules, job ladders, and labor-management cooperation that isolated low-wage, non-unionized workers.

El Comité's direct knowledge of trade union-management cooperation derived mainly from the workplace experiences of several members, especially Noel Colón and Pedro Rentas.¹⁵³ Both Colón, a welder, and Rentas, an autoworker, spent several years in the early 1970s attempting to form rank-and-file committees in their plants to protest dangerous and unhealthy work conditions, layoffs, speedups, discrimination in job assignments, unresponsive or hostile union leadership, as well as red-baiting. At the Ford Plant in Mahwah, New Jersey where Rentas worked, the United Rank and File Committee of UAW 906 described itself as a "multi-racial committee of black, Latino and white workers that tries to build rank-and-file unity [in response] to the racism and divisions that the company and unfortunately some union officials try to push." (*UL*, vol. 2, no. 21 February 24-March 10, 1973: 3) On one occasion of a night shift walkout when temperatures in the plant reached over 100 degrees, the head of the local ran "to the highway telling the workers to return to work and not to listen to the communists" (*UL*, vol. 3, no. 4 July 14-30, 1973: 1-2).

In the Tank House where copper was refined at the U.S. Metals Refining Co. in Carteret, New Jersey, approximately 200 workers labored "all day on top of tanks of acid...beating sheets of copper" with acid burns destroying the laborers' work clothes every few days. With little ventilation and soaring summer temperatures in the plant, workers breathed harmful fumes that caused frequent ailments. When the plant doctor issued instructions to switch to lighter duties, workers found layoff letters on their time cards. Appeals to the union produced no results. The rank-and-file "Concerned Workers

¹⁵³ Noel Colón was President of the Teamsters Union in Puerto Rico when he was killed on November 15, 2001, by a co-worker. My account of his organizing activities is obtained from interviews with other former members of El Comité and from *UL* and *OEM*. Another former workplace activist and EC member interviewed on 7/25/04 asked not to be identified.

at U.S. Metals” tried, without success, to challenge and replace the union leadership of Local 837 of the United Steelworkers Union (*UL*, vol. 2, no. 17 December 16-31, 1972: 1-2; and vol. 3, no. 1 April 14-28, 1973: 4, 11).

Though the details of why neither of these attempts succeeded are unclear, Rentas explained to me in Puerto Rico that attempting to organize rank and file committees in those years required a lot of time after work and a willingness to risk one’s job. The workplace organizers believed it would take years of long-term commitment to cultivate relationships of trust with co-workers, to mount effective resistance in the face of overwhelming obstacles to workplace conditions and, most certainly, to make their case for a more militant and united labor movement in the country. Neither of their efforts produced tangible results, and by mid-decade both left El Comité and New York to live in Puerto Rico. Before leaving, they formed the Frente Obrero Unido (FOU, trans. United Workers’ Front) in 1974, which was El Comité’s attempt to address “national chauvinism and racism [which divide] the working class.”¹⁵⁴ Lasting several years, FOU provided a forum for progressive representatives of union locals, rank-and-file members of locals, and unorganized workers to discuss and to strategize about issues they faced at work. FOU claimed to include among its participants workers from construction, garment, service, and light manufacturing industries.¹⁵⁵ Its most successful worksite activism was the campaign for greater access for minority workers to construction jobs in New York City.

¹⁵⁴ “Worker’s Front (F.O.U.) Founding Assembly,” *Obreros en Marcha*, vol. 1, no. 4, Sept. 23, 1974.

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 2.

Minority Construction Workers Fight for Inclusion

The campaign to open access to construction jobs for minority workers, as told by Nelson Gómez, who was the oldest member of El Comité and is now a retired construction worker residing in Florida, had more tangible results. Historically, the construction industry in New York denied minority workers access to jobs, especially in the skilled trades. As a result of protests in the 1960s, the federal and local governments issued affirmative action hiring goals and obligatory directives for industries that pursued government contracts. In 1969, the Nixon administration mandated construction trades to increase minority representation in their workforces to 20% within five years. Localities were free to develop their own plans, as long as these were consistent with the federal mandate. Peter Brennan, then-President of the New York City Building and Construction Trades Council, lobbied unsuccessfully against the federal program. However, his opposition to Mayor Lindsay's policy initiative to mandate the training of 4,000 minorities in the "New York Plan" succeeded in reducing the number to 800 trainees. After helping deliver the "labor vote" for Nixon's reelection in 1972, Brennan was appointed Secretary of Labor, where he served until 1975.

Known for his vehement opposition to affirmative action, Labor Secretary Brennan did nothing to enforce the altered "New York Plan." Like many other affirmative action programs, it was treated as an ideal – difficult to achieve and not enforced by any governmental authority. The number of minority trainees and workers incorporated through local affirmative action programs was low, and pay scales tended to fall below the average standards for the construction trades. Minority workers in New York City thought the Plan was a sham. The Building and Construction Trades Council

had a closed-door policy toward Blacks and Puerto Ricans under Brennan's stewardship, and little had changed under federal or local affirmative action plans. In the 1970s Black and Puerto Rican workers, fed up with unemployment, underemployment, and discriminatory hiring practice, were determined to break the barriers:¹⁵⁶

“First there was an organization [Harlem Fight Back] of mainly blacks led by Jim Haughton. There was a big job at Lincoln Hospital where all the workers were white and from outside the Bronx. A couple of us [workers from El Comité] went to the meeting called by Fight Back. [Ramón] Velez [from the Bronx] was a racist, and there was going to be a big confrontation between Blacks and Puerto Ricans. The Frente [FOU] knew there had to be cooperation between us if we were going to get anywhere, and we encouraged everyone to work together. That's how the Black and Puerto Rican Construction Workers' Coalition came about.”
(Nelson Gómez, 4/20/06)

The Black and Puerto Rican Construction Workers Coalition (BPRC) formed in the mid-1970s to pressure construction companies with city contracts to hire minority workers. Another of their targets after Lincoln Hospital was the dormitory construction site at City College in Manhattan, where the State Dormitory Authority had issued contracts for a \$90 million complex of offices, classrooms, and auditoriums, on a campus located in the midst of Harlem and Manhattanville.¹⁵⁷ The BPRC joined the Manhattan North Coalition (MNC), a city-wide coalition of workers' organizations and minority contractors, to ensure that significant numbers of jobs at the site were given to minority construction workers. For almost a full week in October 1974, workers occupied the site at City College, shutting down construction work while negotiations took place with the contracting agency, the State Dormitory Authority in Albany. Though MNC won the demands that minorities would comprise 50 percent of employees and that 25 percent of contracts would be awarded to minority-owned companies, the State Dormitory

¹⁵⁶ “Polarization Over Hiring Minorities in Building Trades.” *New York Times*, March 17, 1975.

¹⁵⁷ “City College: Workers Demand Jobs, Call for Unity in Action.” *OEM*, vol. 1 no. 6, May 1975: 7, 11.

Authority did not fulfill its obligations. The leadership of Local 3 of the Electricians' Union resisted the implementation of the agreement, claiming its members would not work if non-union workers were hired. The Dormitory Authority claimed it had no authority over the hiring practices of Local 3.¹⁵⁸

Following a fruitless period of pleas to the State Dormitory Authority to meet its commitment, on May 8, 1975, the MNC again stopped all work on the site, demanding the immediate hiring of 56 workers to comply with the 50 percent agreement. When the Dormitory Authority refused, a demonstration was held by workers and student supporters who, according to El Comité, were attacked by "goons from Local 3."¹⁵⁹ The police intervened and disbanded the protesters. The BPRC tried to convince Local 3 workers to support the fight against racist hiring practices of contractors and union leaders, as a "struggle for the democratic right to work and earn a living:"¹⁶⁰

"We understood the problem was class, not race. Some white guys said, 'you're not union people.' I told them, 'we're veterans, we fought for this country, we deserve jobs.'" (Nelson Gómez, 4/20/06)

Though I was unable to verify numbers, minority construction workers attained employment at the Lincoln Hospital and City College sites, and at other sites in the city; Gómez worked at Lincoln Hospital for two years. Both Pedro Rentas and Nelson Gómez, in separate interviews, offered nearly identical views on what they thought were El Comité's greatest achievements: first was the progress made in opening employment opportunities in construction for minority workers; second was the linkage they believed they made with other Latino and Black workers through the BPRC and the FOU that

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ "Minority Construction Workers: Against Exclusion, Racism and Corruption." *OEM*, vol. 1 no. 7, June 1975: 3, 9; "Construction Jobs Spark Racial Fight." *New York Times*, May 15, 1975.

¹⁶⁰ *OEM*, vol. 1 no. 7, June 1975: 3, 9.

transcended competition between minority sectors; third was the perspective they felt was shared with other workers on the need for class-based unity.

The loss of two founders who were industrial workers to Puerto Rico is remembered by some as a de facto turn away from an emphasis on organizing workers, especially since there were not many employed, industrial workers in EC and new recruits were drawn mainly from community and campus environments. Still, members of the organization were encouraged to seek “point of production” jobs; and some did, working in factories organized by the ILGWU or in unorganized plants in Long Island, Brooklyn, and New Jersey (Jaime Suárez, 3/18/06; Frank Vergara, 9/3/04). Later in the decade, local chapter members – on a rotating basis – would visit factories where EC members worked in New Jersey and New York to distribute the workers’ sector’s bulletin, *On the Line*, at factory gates.¹⁶¹ These were not, however, industrial workers and their efforts earned little more than the label of “outside agitators.”

Conclusion

One of the distinctive characteristics of the Left in the 1970s – most certainly, of El Comité – was that workers had to overcome “false consciousness” of their objective interests, their allies, and the potential for fundamental material improvements in the context of capitalist society. Activists identifying as the Marxist-Leninist Left who believed they were equipped with the one objective truth believed as well in only one ultimate resolution to social inequality and injustice – proletarian revolution. However, to recall the radical ideological orientation of EC solely as an illustration of failed dogma, or to dismiss the totality of the radical project because the democratic centralist model of organization eventually imploded, would be to miss the democratizing elements of the

¹⁶¹ Several issues of *On the Line* are part of my collection. PATBDC.

campaigns in which subordinate groups transcended the competitive model of ethnic-based political incorporation and sought collective empowerment.

MacLean makes a similar observation about what she calls the “hidden history of affirmative action,” in which working women in the 1970s faced strong hostility when seeking employment in the New York City Fire Department. In a class-action lawsuit brought by a group of women who had been harassed and mistreated by male co-workers in ways that threatened their lives, the women’s only ally among the firefighters was the Vulcan Society, the organization of black male firefighters, whose members testified in support of the women (2006, 1999, 44). The broader contention is that affirmative action legislation, like desegregation policy, did not accomplish inclusion or equality of opportunity in hostile workplaces. To the extent these goals were achieved, it was due to the contentious push from below that forced openings and concessions.

EC’s community and workplace activism in the early 1970s included local campaigns for quality education, better housing, and workplace rights in the Lower East Side, the Bronx, and Long Island. By mid-decade, the newly formed chapter with several members in Boston was also immersed in local efforts to improve the quality of education in poor, mainly minority communities. The democratic rights’ frame targeted public and private sector elites who denied the charges of discrimination and exclusion but faced protesters who were empowered by the belief in the validity of their claims and by the support they received from sympathetic allies. The struggle for bilingual education succeeded when parents disrupted the operation of schools, with the support of some teachers and administrators. The minority workers’ most powerful tool, when negotiations failed to achieve positive outcomes, was the disruption of work. Clearly,

these localized campaigns never materialized into the sustained challenges of national social movements. Furthermore, as in the housing movement, the gains made in fighting discrimination and inequality were short-lived; racial and gender inequality persists in the United States not only for African Americans and Puerto Ricans but also particularly for immigrant workers and women in general (Fine 2005; Browne, Irene, ed. 1999; Omi & Winant 1994).

The positive outcomes of El Comité's activism in this period include the motivation to become politically involved and empowered, which was nurtured by the collective dynamic. El Comité dealt with issues of literacy, relationships, and commitment, in attempting to develop a social practice in which, as Petras (1998) characterizes Che Guevara's practice, "personal and political morality" are entwined. The "morality" debates in El Comité signified the impact other movements and leaders of subordinate groups with similar identities had on the collective consciousness.

McAdam (1996) observed that strategic efforts of subordinate groups can produce a shared awareness of political opportunity and can motivate personal involvement and collective mobilization. By late 1970, El Comité's storefront had become a gathering place for activists to share their ideas, which gradually produced perspectives on class, race, and national identity that shaped their political activities. Formed initially as an informal collective that desired improvements in the quality of life in the neighborhood, the group moved quickly to become a more structured entity supporting independence for Puerto Rico and the aspirations of Latin American left movements. As the group became more involved in workplace, community, and school issues and undertook a program of political education, it began its transformation to a Marxist-Leninist organization.

Convinced that progressive changes in the quality of life of Puerto Ricans in the United States would come through pressures for reforms and, more fundamentally, through a multinational, working-class movement for socialism, El Comité-MINP placed itself within the U.S. communist movement. It would continue to actively support the independence movement in Puerto Rico. But its primary role would have a dual quality: to fight for quality-of-life reforms in Puerto Rican communities and, through these activities, to advocate and recruit for more fundamental social change.

CHAPTER 4
DUALITY OF PURPOSE: SEEKING REFORMS AND IMAGINING
REVOLUTION
1975-1981

Introduction

As harsh as conditions were in minority communities in the early 1970s, local activists attempted to push forward, popularizing their interpretation of and fighting for democratic rights and creating new spaces for staking claims against racial and class injustice – in housing, education, and workplaces. But the worst fiscal crisis in New York City history, exacerbated by national economic recession, local and national economic restructuring, and cuts in federal entitlement funds changed the political environment and posed new challenges for minority activists in New York City by the second half of the 1970s (Mollenkopf 1992; Shefter 1985; Torres 1995). The fiscal crisis peaked in 1975 when the city appeared on the verge of defaulting on its mounting debt to the banks whose short-term loans at high interest rates to the city were secured by the city's obligation to treat debt servicing as a budgetary priority. When the New York State government established the Emergency Financial Control Board (EFCB) as overseer and ultimate authority over the city's budget, including labor negotiations and budget allocations and cuts, the budgetary prerogatives of the city became more restricted.

Still, city administrations during the crisis years made specific budgetary choices based not only on structural constraints but on the powerful political coalitions and sectors to which they owed allegiance (Mollenkopf 1992, 9). With Mayor Lindsay's liberal administration replaced by the Brooklyn Democratic Party loyal Abraham Beame in 1974, severe budget cuts and layoffs under the auspices of "planned shrinkage" hit

minority and poor communities the hardest and intensified neighborhood- and race/ethnicity-based competition for reduced services.¹⁶² The budgetary choices and policies of the Koch Administration provided further evidence that the “liberal city” would accommodate economic restructuring with little regard for the needs of the poor, especially minorities. As Mollenkopf observes, for example, structural economic constraints alone did not explain why, in the period of rapid economic recovery after 1976, with rising revenues, “the Koch administration’s development policies had a greater impact on promoting growth and increasing inequality than its social policies had on abating the cleavages generated by the postindustrial transformation” (1992, 21).

The transformation of El Comité-MINP from community group to revolutionary organization in this period was manifested in three areas of political activism.¹⁶³ First, at the local level, MINP continued to join contentious movements that sought specific policy outcomes. Given the changing local economic and political environment, activists’ immediate objective shifted from expanding democratic rights to opposing budget cuts, racial scapegoating, and the collaboration between the city’s “labor aristocracy” (viewed by MINP as union leaders who accepted municipal layoffs with little opposition in return for protecting the jobs and previously negotiated compensation packages of those union

¹⁶² See John Darnton, “The Cuts Have Already Been Felt in New York: As Usual, the Poor Will Be Most Affected;” Fred Ferretti, “New York Will Be Forced To Be a Much Smaller Apple;” Roger Starr, “Making New York Smaller;” Fred Ferretti, “City U. and City Hall Are Steering Collision Course on Further Cuts;” Sanford Solender, “Meeting Greater Needs With Fewer Dollars;” and Msgr. James J. Murray, “Human Toll Is Exacted By City Budget Slashes;” in *New York Times*, October 19, 1975; February 15, 1976; November 14, 1976; December 9, 1976; December 12, 1976; and December 19, 1976, respectively. On the impact of cuts on education in New York City, see Joenathan Dean, “Impact of Cutback Planning & Management on the Poor and Minorities in New York City: The Case of Public Education,” *The Urban Review*, Volume 16, Number 3/September 1984:123-143.

¹⁶³ Respecting the name change implemented in 1975 at its Formative Assembly to El Comité-MINP, and for ease of reading, I frequently use the acronyms “EC-MINP” and “MINP” in this chapter and next.

members who retained their positions).¹⁶⁴ While MINP still viewed grassroots activism for reforms as an important part of seeking immediate improvements in people's lives, as a revolutionary organization it also believed that fundamental power shifts for working people could not be achieved without revolution. Therefore, its duality of purpose rested in the view that local reform campaigns were also opportunities to recruit new members to the long-term cause of building a larger, class-based resistance movement. In particular, it wanted to become more deeply involved in the "types of political [activities that would] facilitate the effective defense of the Puerto Rican national minority and [its] incorporation into the working class struggles in [the U.S.]"¹⁶⁵ However, given the economic and political shifts in the city during this period, opportunities for multi-ethnic cooperation or even for reducing the gaps between minority and Whites in income and opportunity had diminished. (Torrés 1995, 28-29)

In addition to participating in local campaigns against city and state budget cuts, MINP focused on incorporating women into political action, by forming the Latin Women's Collective with other activists. Based on Freire's idea that empowerment is the central goal of organic education, and similar to the approach at the Highlander Folk Project in Tennessee (Freire 1973; Horton 1990; Horton and Freire 1990), MINP viewed political education and empowerment as a collective, interactive process of interpreting and acting upon social conditions. The Latin Women's Collective provided a forum for women to collectively investigate, interpret, and act upon conditions of gender oppression and exploitation, in both private and public spheres of life.

¹⁶⁴ "N.Y. Labor Leaders and Economic Crisis," *Obreros en Marcha*, Vol. 1 No. 8, July 24, 1975: 7, 10-11.

¹⁶⁵ *Obreros en Marcha: Special Edition on First Assembly*, vol. 3, No. 10, Nov/Dec 1978: 2-3. This document is part of my personal archive to be donated to CUNY's Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, following the deposit of this dissertation. Further references in this chapter to documents to be donated to the Center's archives are indicated with the acronym, "PATBDC."

At a second level of activism, MINP devoted more time, energy, and resources than in the earlier period to “coalition” activity, joining other progressive and revolutionary organizations in national rallies and international solidarity committees that supported democratization and revolutionary movements in Latin America and Africa. EC-MINP, along with PSP and PRRWO, invigorated the movement to free the Puerto Rican nationalist prisoners of the 1950s, tried to increase support among Puerto Ricans and the North American Left for independence, and mobilized to persuade the United Nations to take a stance against U.S. colonialism. The third level of activity involved an ongoing dialogue about “party-building” with other Left organizations around the country interested in exploring paths for unifying their small groups and eventually building a new communist party.

The experiences discussed in Chapter 4 are drawn from each level of activity from 1975 to 1981 to illustrate how the interaction between political opportunities and political consciousness of activists shaped protest and political education campaigns, and to consider how the consolidated Marxist-Leninist ideological perspective affected MINP’s activism. The first section on the Latin Women’s Collective demonstrates the view of political self-organization as “collective action in which women as activists and leaders define goals and construct strategies....” (Brenner & Laslett 1991, 313) Following the examples of women’s federations in Cuba, Vietnam, and Nicaragua (prior to the Sandinista victory), the Latin Women’s Collective was formed to engage working class, mainly Latina women in political discussion that would inspire and motivate political activism.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ For perspectives of Nicaraguan women, see Randall and Yanz, *Sandino’s Daughters*; on Vietnamese women, see Sandra C. Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas,

The next section of the Chapter explores MINP's involvement in the national "party building" movement of the late 1970s to suggest one of the dilemmas of the dual-purposed, reform-revolution radical project. On one side, the urge to build a movement by strengthening networks of communication among like-minded organizations was based in the understanding that pockets of localized, isolated protest would not produce the power potential of a larger movement. On the other side, the sectarian debates over ideological nuances drained participants' energy and resources. Moreover, the scattering of MINP's membership among local protest campaigns, solidarity networks, and party-building dialogue, which Miliband (1991) and Elbaum (2002) characterize generally as the frenetic voluntarism of the Left, split the focus of members among a multitude of tasks. During the period when MINP devoted time, energy, and resources to building networks within the national Left and debating political lines, the leadership became more isolated from the membership and the organization as a whole more distanced from and irrelevant to the communities where they originated.

Several campaigns against cuts in education and health care and to protect access to higher education at SUNY Old Westbury are analyzed in the next section as social movements in which, similar to earlier campaigns, MINP's activists utilized mobilizing frames that sought and achieved broad consensus on specific goals rather than on narrowly-defined ideological perspectives, and built alliances that effectively challenged elite policies. With regard to health care and education, the changed political and

2003); on the Federation of Cuban Women, see Madre at www.madre.org/sister/Cuba.html and Marjorie Kind, "Cuba's Attack on Women's Second Shift, 1974-1976," in *Women in Latin America: An Anthology from Latin American Perspectives*, ed. Eleanor Leacock et al. Though subsequent studies of women in revolutionary movements question the progress of socialist-inspired, twentieth century revolutions in overcoming gender inequality, in the mid-1970s the Nicaraguan and Vietnamese revolutionary movements and the Cuban revolution were regarded by activists as leaders in addressing the "woman question." See "Marxism and Women's Liberation," *Obreros en Marcha*, vol. 1, no. 9, August 23, 1975: 4-5, 10-11.

economic environment altered the framing of grievances from the expansive demands of the earlier period to the defensive protest against service cutbacks and racial scapegoating. Despite activists' efforts, militant campaigns were more difficult to launch and to sustain in the more politically conservative and economically competitive environment, but small and limited victories were achieved. The examples used in the chapter include the protests at SUNY Old Westbury, where a multi-ethnic student/faculty coalition fought to protect access to higher education for a diverse, mainly working-class population, and the successful campaign of the Coalition in Defense of Puerto Rican and Hispanic Rights to keep Metropolitan Hospital after it had been targeted for closure by the Koch Administration.

The section on National and International Solidarity Networks analyzes this aspect of MINP's activism as a realm of collective interaction, distinguishable from the community-based experience that formed El Comité in 1970, based primarily not in grassroots mobilizing but in the interaction of like-minded organizations of the Left. Social movement scholars have recognized the importance of international solidarity networks in widening the base of support for nationally based social movements (Giugni and Passy 2001). In the decade-long campaign to free Puerto Rican nationalist prisoners, core activists gradually broadened their anti-colonial frame to gain the support of mainstream actors. The national movement grew to include political elites from the United States and Puerto Rico, civil and human rights activists, and religious groups who collectively demanded the prisoners' release based on the consensus that the nationalists' imprisonment was unfairly prolonged. The campaign to persuade the United Nations' Decolonization Committee to denounce U.S. colonial rule and to recognize Puerto Rico's

right to self-determination was not a broad-based popular movement. However, the national and international solidarity networks, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), representatives of pro-independence as well as pro-statehood parties in Puerto Rico, and many Puerto Rican activists, have persuaded the Decolonization Committee to recognize Puerto Rico's right to sovereignty for the past sixteen years. However, despite the recommendations of the Committee, the U.N. General Assembly has declined to address the case of Puerto Rico; consequently, the pressure these resolutions place on the United States to address the colonial issue is negligible.

In sum, Chapter 4 illustrates the two-sided impact of MINP's dual approach to protest politics in contrast to its formative years earlier in the decade. On the one hand, the organization helped achieve limited successes in several local campaigns. Integration into solidarity networks increased MINP's visibility within the national Left and consolidated relationships with Left movements from other countries. In some cases, solidarity movements succeeded in shining an international spotlight on cases of injustice and in drawing greater national attention to anti-imperialist struggles. On the other hand, EC-MINP's increased commitments and ideological focus reduced its concentration on local activism. The premise that the theoretical debates among the Left entailed a gradual and ultimately damaging shift in focus is more fully treated in the following chapter as an aspect of MINP's disintegration.

Latin Women's Collective

In the months prior to the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, a delegation from the Vietnamese Women's Union invited activist women from the United States to a conference in Montreal, Canada. El Comité-MINP planned to attend, as did many of the Left organizations New York City. Student activists, a Columbia University secretary who was a veteran of the West Side housing movement, and other women such as Dr. Helen Rodríguez of Lincoln Hospital were also invited.¹⁶⁷ The New York delegation – Black, White and Latina women – met in advance to organize their travel and discuss their roles at the conference. A small group of Latina women created a study group to prepare for the trip:

“We studied and learned about our history in the general sense but also in regard to the role of women within Latino political movements. The study made us see the importance of our role in social change. We learned about Vietnamese and Cuban women as well.... I still have the books from the time about the important roles women played in the struggles in Vietnam and Cuba.” (Sandra Trujillo, 4/8/06)

Sandra Trujillo was not yet a member of El Comité-MINP but had met some of its members while in her first year at Columbia, where she helped mobilize students to support Operation Move-In on the West Side. She was a student activist, Chicana, recruited by Columbia University from San Francisco's Mission District, at a time when the University was trying to recruit more students of color. In 1975 she was still at Columbia, having returned to her studies after living in Puerto Rico for a couple of years.

¹⁶⁷ From her post at Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx, Dr. Helen Rodríguez was widely known for her public exposure of lead poisoning of children and other urban health care issues. As a practitioner first in Puerto Rico, she learned of the widespread sterilization abuse of women by the local government and was later instrumental in getting federal sterilization guidelines passed. In 2001, President Clinton awarded her the Presidential Medal of Honor for her distinguished public service. She was well-known in Latino communities and remembered as a champion of health care and human rights.

Growing up in San Francisco, Sandra participated in youth programs since the age of 12 where she was inspired by progressive program counselors:

“They instilled in us the notion that we needed to be active. If we went to college, we had to come back to serve in our communities. It was the time of the anti-war movement. We weren’t so much influenced by the Chicano brown beret movement but more influenced by a sense of Latin American unity.” (Sandra Trujillo, 4/8/06)

As a representative of a citywide youth collective, Sandra had opportunities to speak about poverty and police harassment in San Francisco’s communities of color. She had come to Columbia University on a scholarship in 1970 at the age of 17 with what she called “a student-youth-community-control kind of orientation.” Feeling alienated in what felt like a “hostile” environment at Columbia, she joined the Latino student organization for support.

In the early 1970s, following in the footsteps of the 1968 Columbia University campus chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the Latin Student Organization joined other student groups in protesting the War in Southeast Asia. Sometimes, representatives of local political movements spoke on campus about the connections they perceived between the war and the oppression of minorities and the poor in the United States. Minority leaders and students in particular criticized the ivy-league institution for ignoring the deteriorated conditions in surrounding neighborhoods of Harlem and Manhattan Valley. When squatters took over buildings on West 106th Street in the Spring of 1971, Sandra and another student led several hundred students on a march to support the squatters. The following year, groups of Latin American, Black, Asian, and White protesters occupied six campus buildings, disrupting classes at

Columbia for over a week.¹⁶⁸ Federico Lora of El Comité, along with a delegation of tenants from the West Side, joined the Latin American Students in the building they were holding to offer reciprocal support.

“The students took over my building, Lewisohn Hall,” explained Ana Juarbe, a Columbia University secretary at the time and resident of the Upper West Side.

According to Ana, the seeds of the Latin Women’s Collective were sown in the relationships that were built during the housing and student movements of the early 1970s:

“We used to have women’s groups as squatters on 111th Street...and we would talk about how important it was for women to speak up, to provide leadership.... I was so timid. I wasn’t a student, and I always felt I didn’t fit in. So it was very interesting to me to hear women talking.” (Ana Juarbe, 4/8/06)

The meeting in Canada did not take place until several years after the peak of the housing movement. But the Latina women who had attended the conference from New York City had remained active in local issues and were convinced that women’s empowerment was vital to movements for progressive change. Empowerment meant withdrawing the consent they gave, explicitly or implicitly, to institutions, individuals, or ideas that exploited, abused, and constrained them. Following the conference, the women (including Trujillo who had by then joined MINP) continued meeting as a group to study and work together on issues of particular concern to women.

Around the same time, EC-MINP was discussing internally the desirability of forming a mass organization of women to draw Latina women into political study and

¹⁶⁸ “Columbia Classes Held Under Makeshift Conditions;” “Columbia and Protesters Meet and Trade Demands;” “Policeman Hurt, Three Seized in Protests at Columbia;” “Antiwar Protests Erupt Across U.S.: Columbia Rally Ends Again with Clash with Police,” *New York Times*, April 25, April 27, May 1, and May 10, 1972, respectively.

action (Martell 1998). The Latin Women's Collective (LWC) formed in 1975 both organically, from various struggles and public discussions where women had formed bonds, and as a result of a conscious effort of EC-MINP, PSP, and MPD (Movimiento Popular Dominicano). The initial members came from the network that already existed among women who had attended the Vietnamese-sponsored conference.

The core activists in the LWC believed that racism, sexism, and economic inequality affected Latina women in ways that were manifest in their lives every day. They wanted to increase their literacy skills and intellectual development, to create a forum for Latina women to study oppression, and to become a voice against those conditions.¹⁶⁹ They read articles on feminism and Marxism, studied health, education, and labor conditions, and interchanged with women active in Latin American political movements to discuss overcoming mutual obstacles to their development as leaders. The first LWC public event was intended to educate women in their communities about the effects of war on Vietnamese women. But it turned into a celebration, as the war ended in April 1975, just prior to the event.

The three women interviewed from the LWC agreed that their overall objective was “to raise consciousness among working class women” because “we wanted women to take leadership roles in all kinds of struggles” (Ana Juarbe, Carmen Martell, and Sandra Trujillo, 4/8/06).

“The thing that was important about all of this was that we had to believe *ourselves* that we had potential as political leaders, despite our insecurities, despite the messages we received as victims of domestic violence or social oppression. The Latin Women's Collective created leaders. Even when you go home, you're a leader. Understanding and dealing with your family is leadership. We can be

¹⁶⁹ These objectives were drawn from several issues in my files of the LWC's bulletin, *La Semilla*, PATBDC.

leaders in our workplace and community as well.” (Carmen Martell, 4/8/06)

Ana Juarbe’s story illustrated the point. Her association with women community and student leaders inspired her to be a leader. During one LWC committee meeting, she volunteered to research the topic of women and welfare:

“I was not a student. It was the first time in my life I tried to write a paper. It was the first time I was going to approach this as a leader, to critically assess this because it was a big issue in our community. I read Frances Fox Piven [and Cloward] and some other books and talked to people. And then I wrote this report. The LWC gave me an opportunity to develop these skills.” (Ana Juarbe, 4/8/06)

Ana described herself as “tongue-tied” the first time she presented her topic before a large gathering. But her support network was in the audience, particularly Liz Figueroa from MINP who broke the silence at the end of the presentation to ask a question: “I’ll never forget that. Whenever I see Liz, I think of the moment she was so supportive the first time I spoke” (Ana Juarbe, 4/8/06).

The notion of political action held by the Latin Women’s Collective clearly differed from the concept of getting individuals to vote for others to represent and press their claims in governmental institutions. It was a view centered in the idea that direct action by large numbers of people requires individuals who see themselves collectively as agents of change. The process toward that realization is in itself empowering, though not necessarily measurable by concrete socioeconomic and political outcomes, as a withdrawal of consent to oppression. In this view, the process of women’s liberation is internal and personal as well as social and political.

Nor did the participants in the LWC believe that the broader feminist movement in the United States adequately articulated or represented the experiences and concerns of

working class women of color. The members thought it was important to build relationships with progressive women around the country but sought to have their perspective on gender and class oppression, their experiences as women of color, represented in what was mainly a White-dominated movement. The first opportunity to do this came in July 1975 at a national conference entitled, “Socialist Feminism” at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

The conference was organized by a number of women’s organizations, including the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union, the New American Movement’s Women’s Caucus, and the Berkeley/Oakland Women’s Union. Attended by 1500 women, its purpose was to “share our organizing experience, broaden our perspectives and assert socialist feminism as a strategy for revolution.”¹⁷⁰ Merely fifty of the 1500 were women of color.¹⁷¹ The Latina women noted their differences with White feminists:

“I consider myself a feminist to this day, but there were some big differences with the White feminists at the time. Women of color who considered themselves feminists had a different understanding of feminism from white women. We believed in the liberation of women, but we thought about it in the context of family, and we loved our men. But we had a stereotype image of the White feminist who takes off her bra.” (Ana Juarbe, 4/8/06)

“In Ohio, the biggest problem we had related to the differences we saw between White women who talked about all women being oppressed and our experience as working class women of color. We were (and are) oppressed differently, and we need to understand those differences to have unity.” (Carmen Martell, 4/8/06)

The LWC participants did not think the conference panels, with such little representation of working class and minority women, could expect to produce a comprehensive analysis of the conditions faced by women in the U.S. They formed a caucus with like-minded

¹⁷⁰ The flyer announcing the 1975 Socialist-Feminist Conference was found in both El Comité and LWC files, PATBDC.

¹⁷¹ “Socialist-Feminism or Class Struggle?” *Obreros en Marcha*, vol. 1 no. 8, July 24, 1975: 6.

attendees to relay their criticism. The caucus position opened the conference to a discussion of their concerns, leading to a consensus to allow “non-panel” participants to participate as panelists in the conference workshops. The dialogue between the “third world women’s caucus” and other feminist groups continued for several years thereafter.

In subsequent months, the LWC turned its attention to political education, recruitment, and activism, and (according to my interviewees) boasted 200 members by the Spring of 1976. Three committees – Labor, Health, and Education – developed various activities. The Labor Committee researched workplace conditions and unemployment, disseminated information in local factories where women worked, and built relationships with women in unions. The Health Committee held health fairs in city parks and at cultural events to share information with other women on mental and physical health issues, including sterilization abuse and birth control. The Education Committee spread information on how budget cuts eroded the quality of education, on the negative impact of the tracking system, and on the lack of adequate, affordable day care facilities in New York City for working mothers.

The public events sponsored by the Latin Women’s Collective from 1975 to 1978 often included cultural components as well, where music and street theater groups contributed their interpretations and celebrations of women’s struggles and achievements. One event celebrated International Working Women’s Day in 1977 at the Weldon Johnson Community Center, a settlement house on East 110th Street. An activity of this sort, organized by local Latina women for women and their families, speaking to issues of education, health, welfare, and labor, was a rare event in East Harlem. Afterwards, the Education Committee decided to hold English classes in the community as something

concrete and tangible it could offer to local women, while encouraging them to join the Collective:

“We found a storefront on 115th Street in Harlem and, since some of us were teachers, we began to offer literacy classes to the community. We had been studying Paulo Freire and believed it was important to incorporate the issues that community women were facing into the substance of what we were teaching.” (Sandra Trujillo, 4/8/06)

Ultimately, this particular strategy of the LWC confronted practical problems and created tensions within the Collective that partly contributed to its eventual demise. On the practical front, it was extremely difficult for the all-volunteer group to pay storefront rent and to maintain a constant, visible presence in East Harlem. The problem of self-perpetuation by grassroots organizations has long been acknowledged by social movement scholars. When an organization confronts the financial realities of its existence, much of its potential organizing energies become redirected to the ongoing task of fundraising in order to fund staff and office facilities. The problem speaks to a larger issue of how to build a mass movement for social change comprised of energetic and committed volunteers over a long period of time who cannot afford a “headquarters.” The Education Committee volunteers, without financial compensation, spent many hours preparing for their community classes and education agendas. As workers themselves, in most cases with children, their dedication to community work was difficult to sustain in light of family obligations. Furthermore, the LWC did not seek governmental or non-governmental, institutional funding:

“We never went after foundation money. We didn’t know about anything like that.” (Sandra Trujillo, 4/8/06)

The idea of seeking funding from the institutions one believes do not support the cause of radical social change was considered a potentially damaging conflict of interest or collaboration with those who wanted to co-opt or dilute potential radicalism:

“Why would you get funds from that structure? You would be letting people down. In El Comité, we would not allow people to work for the city because the city would corrupt you. You would not be representing the people. In the late 1960s and 70s, our organizations were battling government and you did not want to be part of it. When we get to the 1980s, we begin to broaden our view of the alternatives, which you see in the role we played in the Dinkins’ administration.”¹⁷²(Carmen Martell, 4/8/06)

In her personal account, Esperanza Martell, former member of the LWC and El Comité member until 1972, attributed the dissolution of the LWC to a disagreement between those “who wanted to strengthen our anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist perspective and those who wanted to ‘mainstream’ the organization...and have the members more involved in decision-making.” (1998, 185) In Martell’s view, the LWC was already democratic, and “mainstreaming” reflected a “change [in] the working class politics of the [collective].” In later years, internal tension in EC-MINP between those who viewed some of the organization’s involvement in community struggles as “reformist” and wanted to strengthen the emphasis on party-building and those who believed their local activism was an essential part of expanding political protest contributed to MINP’s demise.¹⁷³ The women I interviewed offered this perspective on the Latin Women’s Collective demise several years after it had formed:

“It’s like anything in our movement. We created something we thought was a really good thing. And we recruited a lot of women who were not affiliated with any political organization whatsoever

¹⁷² Carmen Martell’s reference to EC-MINP’s position against city employment referred to governing institutions, not public sector employment in general.

¹⁷³ The post-MINP decision of some former members to participate in local electoral politics is discussed in Chapter 5.

and who, otherwise, were never going to be part of a political organization. We were able to elevate their consciousness a degree. However, most of these women were working or housewives. They had other priorities. Their priorities were not to develop this big organization. They wanted to be part of something for a time, and they were.” (Carmen Martell, 4/8/06)

While their objectives were met for only a short time, the experience demonstrates once again the practical obstacles to and mixed outcomes of the radical democratization project. Wages were not increased as a result of the efforts of the LWC. Nor did community health care or day care services improve. But countless women learned about sterilization abuse and decreased their vulnerability, eventually stopping the most abusive practices. The participants developed skills in research, writing, public speaking; in coalition and alliance building; in family and workplace negotiation; and in asserting their rights to fairness in the workplace, and to quality education and health care. Women veterans of the LWC occupy positions of leadership in public service, advocacy organizations, government, and schools, serving as role models for younger generations.¹⁷⁴

Though difficult to measure, the reach of radical politics in the form of initiating collection interaction, as in the Latin Women’s Collective, is profound. In few other settings, certainly in no mainstream political party, would working class women read Freire or Piven and Cloward. The very concept of democratization embraced by such an approach connotes direct collective action to shape private and public conditions as opposed to a process of casting a vote. The achievement for the radical political project lies in the exposure of countless women, men, and children to an interpretation of

¹⁷⁴ For example, Sandra Trujillo is Deputy Director of the Children’s Defense Fund of New York and served as Deputy Director of the Mayor’s Office for Children & Families in the Dinkins’ Administration; Ana Juarbe is the HealthStart Program Manager for the City of New York. Carmen Martell is Human Resources Director for UniteHere and previously worked in the Manhattan Borough President’s Office.

political involvement based in daily, direct, empowering action rather than in passive or tacit support for elites in private and public spheres.

“Party Building and Its Relationship to the Masses”

In the mid-1970s, six founding and/or early members of EC-MINP left the organization to live in Puerto Rico. Among them were Maria Collado, Noel Colón, and Pedro Rentas. They believed, as did several of the Left organizations in Puerto Rico, that nationalist and socialist revolution in Puerto Rico was imminently achievable and that they could make a greater contribution to a workers’ movement in Puerto Rico than in the U.S.¹⁷⁵ Soon after their departure, founder and First Secretary Federico Lora announced that he, too, would be leaving permanently for Puerto Rico following a one-year period of preparation for a full-membership Assembly. The goal of the Assembly was to evaluate the work of the past three years and to project the organization’s course for the coming period.¹⁷⁶

The period of study prior to the “First Assembly”¹⁷⁷ was MINP’s most serious and inclusive attempt to understand and articulate its place within the changing local, national, and international political economy. Members’ critiques and revisions of documents on structure, security, the meaning of “mass work” and cadre development, party-building, and international solidarity were submitted to the Central Committee through their local chapters. At the sessions of the Assembly, the full members of EC-MINP approved a revised, more elaborate internal structure and produced public

¹⁷⁵ This impression was attained both from interviews with those individuals and from statements of organizations in Puerto Rico that were published in *Obreros en Marcha*.

¹⁷⁶ “First Assembly: Program for the Coming Period,” *Obreros en Marcha*, Vol. 3 No. 10 (Nov/Dec 1978).

¹⁷⁷ The prior Assembly of 1975, discussed in Chapter 3, was called the “Formative Assembly,” signifying the transition of El Comité to El Comité-MINP.

documents on MINP's projections for local political work, national party building, and international solidarity in the coming period.¹⁷⁸

The departure of Federico Lora following the Assembly was made more difficult by the subsequent move to Puerto Rico of another leading member, Orlando Colón. The internal culture of MINP in general nurtured close, familial ties. Lora was a central figure in the founding, evolution, and theoretical and ideological development of the organization and played key roles in local struggles and in relationships with other national and international Left organizations. Both Lora and Colón had personally recruited and encouraged many participants and played prominent roles in shaping the internal political education program. The transition to a new First Secretary, Victor Quintana, and the reorganization of leadership bodies and other internal units occurred over the one-year Assembly-preparation period. The most salient features of structural and programmatic changes following the Assembly were the addition of various new units other than local chapters (such as Propaganda, Finance, Political Education, and External Relations Commissions) and the commitment to devote more energy and resources to working nationally with other organizations of the Left that shared the long-range goal of building a new communist party in the United States.

In the first of its two-part position paper on party-building distributed in 1978, entitled "Party Building and its Relationship to the Masses," MINP criticized those organizations of the Marxist-Leninist Left that identified themselves as "vanguard" communist parties, pointing out that most of these relatively small groups had few

¹⁷⁸The public documents of the Assembly, including speeches, PATBDC.

connections with workers and were active mainly in anti-imperialist solidarity networks:¹⁷⁹

“Originating essentially in a morally-outraged petty bourgeoisie consisting largely of students and young professionals, this movement assumed an anti-imperialist character and developed in...opposition to reformism and class conciliation. Nevertheless, [it retains strong elements of the] characteristics which it opposed. Its class nature...[is a] formidable obstacle to its development....

[One] consequence...has been that the appeal of anti-imperialism...serves mainly to direct individual and joint efforts to the support of struggles outside the country...as an easy escape from the frustration of finding no organized means of coping with domestic problems which require leadership and perseverance...”¹⁸⁰

Based on this position, MINP joined approximately twenty-five groups nationwide in discussions on how to build a national revolutionary movement that might eventually lead to the formation of a more viable radical political party. Meeting over a period of several years, the collective called itself the “anti-dogmatist, anti-revisionist trend.”¹⁸¹ When the Philadelphia Workers Organizing Committee proposed that the “trend” designate itself as an “Organizing Committee for an Ideological Center” (OCIC), or what they called a “pre-party formation,” MINP and some of the groups declined to join, believing that declaring “ideological” leadership was hasty and premature and that

¹⁷⁹ For example, the Communist League became the Communist Labor Party in 1974; the Revolutionary Union changed to the Revolutionary Communist Party in 1975; and the October League called itself the Communist Party (M-L) beginning in 1977.

¹⁸⁰ El Comité-MINP, *Party Building and Its Relationship to the Masses*, 1978: 5; PATBDC; also obtainable from Bibliomania.

¹⁸¹ Elbaum (2002) discussed the national “party-building” efforts, noting that the “trend” EC-MINP affiliated with was comprised of four other groups: the Detroit Marxist-Leninist Organization, the Philadelphia Workers Organizing Committee, the Potomac Socialist Organization based in Washington, D.C., and the Socialist Union of Baltimore. Twenty groups subsequently joined, including the Socialist Organizing Committee of Orange County, California, the Buffalo Workers Movement, the Bay Area Socialist Organizing Committee of San Francisco. In retrospect, Elbaum characterizes MINP’s position that the “pre-party formation” of the “OCIC” was premature and unrealistic in the period, both because most activists had few connections to workers’ struggles and because the Left in general failed to adequately assess or to seek ways to confront the severe racial/ethnic divisions among working people.

much more grassroots organizing was essential before a viable national party organization could be created:

“[W]e came to the conclusion that our strengths and weaknesses as a movement, as well as the state of class-consciousness and self-organization of the working class, sets objective limits to the organizational forms our movement and...our [anti-dogmatist, anti-revisionist] trend can assume....

“One cannot take root in the masses or learn to advance our struggles... by debates on party-building at the national level or in preparations for such debates or conferences. This can be achieved through engaging in social practice at the grass roots, i.e., locally, in the neighborhoods, the trade unions, or other forms of mass organizations....

“[We must] face the reality that after more than three years of the worst attacks on [workers] since the depression of the 1930s – attacks in which the bosses and the federal and local governments joined forces with such success that corporate profits have risen to annual records – class consciousness among workers is still at a relatively low level. But the forces of our ‘trend,’ ...are yet unable to claim any significant experience in struggles which have...raised the class consciousness of any sector of the working class. Until we are able to do so, we cannot objectively call ourselves the ideological leaders of the working class or usefully consider changing our level of organization to a more advanced centralized form. If we do so, we will only be deceiving ourselves and guaranteeing our isolation...”¹⁸²

MINP proposed as an alternative establishing “centers of communication, cooperation and coordination,” which essentially would be forums in which Left organizations could learn from the experience of others, share resources, and coordinate local and regional work, where possible. Working relationships would be deepened also at the national level through joint activities such as the mobilization in 1978 against the Supreme Court ruling in the case of *University of California Regents v. Bakke* that racial quotas as admissions criteria were unconstitutional and through ongoing international

¹⁸² El Comité-MINP, “*Where to Begin? Centers of Communication, Cooperation and Coordination.*” 1979: 1-3, PATBDC.

solidarity campaigns. Joint political education could provide an additional opportunity for cooperation.

MINP's party-building ideas were well received by groups within the "trend," and discussions continued for a time. By early 1981, however, a split between the members of EC-MINP severely weakened and limited the scope of its activities until its official demise in 1984; and the party-building trend itself dissipated.¹⁸³ Clearly, the perspective brought to the party-building groups was based in EC-MINP's community origins and grassroots' mobilizing experiences. It also reflected the understanding that effective movements develop organically and require mass participation. In fact, MINP's observation of the distance between the party-building movement and grassroots activism was prophetic, because when MINP shifted the emphasis in its political program to national-level, party-building debates, it fractured and declined. Ironically, the recognition of the need for democratic participation in a political movement was contradicted by its own cadre structure and emphasis on recruiting "advanced elements."

Another effect of MINP's immersion in the intellectual, ideological, often obscure, dialogue within the Left (both locally and nationally) was that the organization as a whole became more integrated into the dynamic of interaction within the Left, participating in political, cultural, and social forums attended almost exclusively by that fragment of the population. Though many of its members continued to be active in local struggles, in practical if not explicit terms, those efforts became one part rather than the central focus of the group's attention. Typifying the dilemma of a small organization with an elaborate structure and rules for communication between base and leadership, and with principal leaders preparing for and attending discussions within the Left, some

¹⁸³ The "split" is more fully discussed in Chapter 5.

members found it increasingly difficult to discuss progress and strategies for local political mobilizations with members of leading bodies.

Local Campaigns for Equal Education and Health Care

MINP's local activism in New York City in this period occurred mainly through the members' participation in neighborhood groups formed to fight the budget cuts. The program established at its Formative Assembly in 1975 and First Assembly of 1978 required every member of the organization to be involved in an existing workplace, community, or school organization (or to form one if none existed) in order to promote mobilizations against the cuts. The Bronx Chapter of MINP worked with housing groups that confronted the Koch administration over unfulfilled city and federal promises to address urban decay in the South Bronx;¹⁸⁴ in the Lower East Side, two MINP members who worked at Association Day Care Center joined other day care centers in the neighborhood to promote parent-staff alliances to oppose cuts to daycare funding;¹⁸⁵ and in East Harlem, MINP joined the fight against municipal hospital cuts and the closing of Metropolitan Hospital. Through its Long Island Chapter (formed around 1974) and a West Side member attending classes at SUNY's College at Old Westbury, MINP also became involved in the struggle on that campus against changes in campus policies and against funding reductions that would negatively impact the school's racially diverse, working-class student body.

While the varied attempts around New York City against budget cuts never coalesced into a viable opposition, the movements at SUNY at Old Westbury and in East

¹⁸⁴ Lee Dembart, "Carter Takes 'Sobering' Trip to South Bronx; Finds Hope," *New York Times*, October 6, 1977; "South Bronx Housing Plan Crumbles," *Obreors en Marcha*, Vol. IV, No. 1, March 1979: 7-8.

¹⁸⁵ "Daycare Parents Win Victory at Center;" and "Association Daycare Threatened Once Again," vol. 5, no. 8, October 1980; and vol. 5, no. 9, November-December 1980, respectively.

Harlem for Metropolitan Hospital managed to attain limited victories. Similar contributing factors were present in each case: the expectations of students at Old Westbury and residents of East Harlem of a certain level and quality of services were deeply entrenched; significant sectors of the affected populations were active in pre-existing organizations and dismissed administration or government attempts to demobilize initial protests; and activists' sought broad alliances based on clearly defined objectives. In both cases, MINP's activists were immersed in the mobilizing populations, initiated alliances, and provided a steady flow of educational and propagandistic resources.

Defending SUNY Old Westbury's "Mission"

The efforts of organizers from MINP's student sector, El Frente Estudiantil Puertorriqueño (FEP), to build student unity at SUNY College at Old Westbury illustrate the potential power of broad student coalitions in alliances with other sectors such as faculty and community-based supporters.

The College at Old Westbury held a unique place in the SUNY system. It was founded in the late 1960s as an experimental college whose Mission was "to educate those traditionally by-passed by higher education,"¹⁸⁶ meaning minorities, women, and working people in general. The college's philosophical origins can be traced to the demands of mass progressive movements of the 1960s. Among other things, student protesters across the country in that period criticized the limited curricula and exclusivity of higher education and challenged the institutions they believed perpetuated unequal, inferior education. Students pressured colleges to institute Black and Puerto Rican Studies programs, to institute open enrollment policies, and to expand financial aid

¹⁸⁶ SUNY Old Westbury Catalog, *From the Ground Up*. 1973: 2.

programs (such as EOP and TAP in New York State), in order to make these institutions more representative and accessible. In 1966, when Harris Wofford was named first President of the new liberal arts college planned for Old Westbury, he said the objective of the college would be “to prepare people to understand the world, to deal with its problems and to live and work in it effectively.”¹⁸⁷

Old Westbury’s “experiment” offered admission to students who, because of work and family obligations, financial obstacles, inadequate high school preparation, or discrimination on the basis of race, age, or gender, had been denied access to traditional institutions of higher education.¹⁸⁸ While a permanent campus was being built on the wooded, 605-acre, former Ambrose Clark Estate, in “the heart of the patrician horse country on Long Island’s north shore,” from 1969 to 1971 classes were held the Planting Fields Arboretum in Oyster Bay, also on Long Island’s north shore.¹⁸⁹

Following the initial period of pilot programs at the Planting Fields, the State University Chancellor and Board of Trustees refined the educational direction of Old Westbury by setting general guidelines for the new college:

“By committing itself to a student population that has until now not had an opportunity for higher education and by wrestling pedagogically with the student situation and problems that these students bring with them, the College at Old Westbury unites its earlier mandate to be an experimental and innovative college with its second commitment to the realization of social justice.”¹⁹⁰

In contrast to the traditional university practice of compartmentalizing learning into academic disciplines, four interdisciplinary programs were established: the Politics,

¹⁸⁷ At the time of his appointment, Wofford was Associate Director of the Peace Corps and formerly assistant to President Kennedy on civil rights. See “Peace Corps Aide Heads Long Island College, *New York Times*, November 11, 1966.

¹⁸⁸ Hostos College, Medgar Evers of CUNY, Livingston and Essex Colleges in New Jersey were similarly formed.

¹⁸⁹ Fred M Hechinger, “Where Should You Put A University?” *New York Times*, December 31, 1967.

¹⁹⁰ *From the Ground Up*.

Economics and Society Program (PES); American Studies; Comparative History, Ideas and Cultures (CHIC), and Communicative and Creative Arts (CCA). All four boasted a faculty “every bit as diverse as the student body.”¹⁹¹ Chancellor Ernest L. Boyer provided the rationale underlying the College’s intention to recruit a diverse student body:

“We have an obligation to try to balance and seek to redress a major social error. Until recently we have sought only the gifted who had the financial ability to pay for college. Opportunity can no longer be only for those born in the right star. The University and the schools have an obligation to seek to counter this.”¹⁹²

Diversity was partly defined as “a fairly even balance among Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Whites within the student body, faculty and administration” with representation from other groups as well. (In the years of protest that followed SUNY Central’s retreat from the Mission, students adopted the slogan “30-30-30-10” to symbolize their understanding of an appropriate balance between Blacks, Whites, Latinos, and 10 percent “others,” including international students.) The goal of diversity also applied to age and gender. The college enrolled women and older students who previously had not had higher educational opportunities. In 1973, the average student age on campus was 27; slightly more than half were women (many whose children attended the Early Childhood Education Center on campus, and some who lived on campus in family-friendly facilities); and 20 percent of males were military veterans.¹⁹³

From the outset, with generous financial aid, an expansive suburban setting, and easily accessible by car or train, Old Westbury drew a resident and commuter student population largely from New York City, as well as from Long Island’s working-class

¹⁹¹ *From the Ground Up*, p. 5.

¹⁹² Chancellor Ernest L. Boyer, quoted in *From the Ground Up*, 1973, p. 4. Chancellor Boyer made a similar statement in the *Statesman*, Stony Brook University, 1970.

¹⁹³ *From the Ground Up*, p. 4.

towns. The early admissions policy enabled students without a high school diploma and S.A.T. scores to receive a high school equivalency certificate after successfully completing a year of prescribed college study. Credits for up to one-year of college could be earned for life experience, which appealed to older students. Four-credit courses met twice a week, with an ample evening class schedule, attracted working people. The themes of social justice and diversity obviously appealed to progressives and to those with limited access elsewhere. Several early students became founding members of the New York chapter of the Young Lords while attending classes at the Planting Fields site (Melendez 2003). The socially and economically diverse population of Old Westbury, smack in the middle of an exclusive, wealthier-than-average, racially homogenous suburban town, contrasted sharply with the more traditional population at the neighboring C.W. Post Campus of Long Island University and the New York Institute of Technology.

The tone set by the Mission statement and recruitment goals encouraged solidarity on campus. Students interacted across race, age, gender, and nationality. The typical sectoral-based student clubs (such as the Women's Center, Black Student Union, Alianza Latina, Commuter Students, International Student Union, etc.) collaborated with each other and with faculty to present music, dance, and theater events. Teach-ins on the war and other political issues were held by faculty at the Rathskeller for diverse student audiences.

One news report in the early 1970s shared a young Latina woman's description of the atmosphere:

“She talks glowingly of the beautiful evenings when the students drift into the central plazas, carrying conga drums and flutes and guitars. And she treasures the conversations with the older housewives...’[who

spend] six hours a day here, then go back to their suburban households.”¹⁹⁴

Students wanted to ensure that the reality of the college conformed to the promise of the Mission, but campus conditions from the start engendered conflict along with enthusiasm. In 1971 poor physical conditions at the temporary Planting Fields site led to talks of a student strike. Better classroom and residential facilities, as well as more effective academic support, were demanded and apparently won. The second President, John Maguire, declared that “justice” meant to “build a society which would overcome class distinctions, racial antagonisms and prejudices, sexual discrimination and arrogance” and pledged to pursue such an environment on campus.¹⁹⁵

But the political and economic ramifications of the Mission developed quickly. With nearly 70 percent of students receiving financial aid, and anticipating state budget freezes and cuts, SUNY Chancellor Boyer announced in 1972 the need to do more with less.¹⁹⁶ Also, elected officials from Long Island demanded that the state address the shortage of public higher education opportunities in Nassau and Suffolk Counties. Recognizing Long Island as “the most underserved area in the United States,” the four-year SUNY Master Plan of 1972 gave the region ‘top priority’ in the creation of space for additional students.”¹⁹⁷ Though the 1973-1974 Catalog continued to feature the original recruitment Mission and commitment to “organizing the curriculum around the theme of human justice,” President Maguire and his administration tried to implement specific provisions of the new Master Plan, designed to alter Old Westbury’s Mission. The most

¹⁹⁴ George Vecsey, “Students at Old Westbury College Concerned Over State Plan to Enroll More Long Island Commuters.” *New York Times*, May 27, 1974.

¹⁹⁵ *From the Ground Up*.

¹⁹⁶ Gene L. Maeroff, “End of Building Program and Change in Enrollments Planned by State U,” *New York Times*, August 9, 1972.

¹⁹⁷ *ibid*.

blatant changes included redefining the geographic areas of recruitment, establishing more traditional academic programs, luring transfer students from local community colleges, and reducing the number of evening course offerings. These measures would, in effect, reduce the enrollment of “traditionally bypassed” students, especially those who originated from New York City or who worked full-time. As reported in the *New York Times*:

“Many student leaders and faculty members who have learned of the preliminary master plan say they were unaware of this ‘double mission’ and that they were recruited on the basis of the initial experimental atmosphere.... One student leader...said, ‘I wondered when I came here ...how they could put a college like this in the middle of Nassau [County]. I also wondered when the ax was going to fall. They’re going to have fewer people like myself, the older student, and minority students....I hate to see it happen. This place has been very exciting....”¹⁹⁸

The Mission was threatened as well by inadequate funding of existing programs and none for promised improvements. Skills-building and remediation programs were cut; and expectations for the development of a fully bilingual/bicultural program were not met. Poor campus transportation limited access of resident students to the few off-campus recreational sites. Many students, trying to balance their studies with work, took longer than four years to graduate (more typical today); and attrition rates were the highest of SUNY schools. The new campus needed sustained financial and moral support from Albany; but, with encroaching recession, resources tightened. There was also pressure from Nassau County legislators to change the college Mission by incorporating programs such as Business Administration that would appeal to transfer students from Long

¹⁹⁸ For additional reactions by students and faculty, see “‘College for Poor’ Shifting Policies.” *New York Times*, October 14, 1973.

Island's two-year community colleges.¹⁹⁹ In the Spring 1974, faculty and students voted unanimously to censure President Maguire for what seemed like his capitulation to the State. Following the censure vote, the Board of Regents halted all building projects on campus.²⁰⁰

The following year, students mobilized against the threat to the Mission. Two student leaders, Manuel Ortiz and Donald Lorick, had come to Old Westbury from Upper Manhattan. Both had been encouraged to apply by Dr. Janet Karlson, a former Communist Party member, Daily Worker journalist, head of a Harlem youth program, and mother of MINP member, Kathe Karlson (Manuel Ortiz, 8/1/06). Lorick was President of the Black Student Union; Ortiz, a former housing activist and member of MINP, was active in Student Government and Alianza Latina (Manuel Ortiz, 8/1/06). At campus town meetings, they called on students to prepare for actions against the shifts in the College's direction.²⁰¹ Ortiz encouraged students to discuss grievances with faculty members who were likely to become allies in any actions students decided to take. The PES Program faculty seemed to be a natural ally, as evidenced by the Program description in the Fall 1972 Bulletin:

“The Program in Politics, Economics and Society is an interdisciplinary program in the social sciences. Its main thrust is to approach the study of the social sciences from the perspectives and the concerns of the people of the Third World, including Third World minority groups in the United States.” (p.40)

Students learned that faculty and administration were embroiled in controversy over the Middle States Association accreditation review that was to occur during the 1975-76

¹⁹⁹ “‘College for Poor’ Shifting Policies,” *New York Times*, December 14, 1973.

²⁰⁰ George Vecsey, “Students at Old Westbury College Concerned Over State Plan to Enroll More Long Island Commuters,” *New York Times*, May 27, 1974.

²⁰¹ *Catalyst*, vol. 3, no. 5, November 1975.

academic year. In the joint self-study prepared for the Middle States team, the faculty and administration had identified three objectives for the college:

1. to build a college committed in all its aspects to the principles of social justice;
2. to serve principally resident and commuting students of the growing urban and suburban populations of the southeastern region of New York; and
3. to give priority in its admission policies to those historically by-passed by higher education, including transfers from the regional two-year colleges.

However, in contrast to the collaborative review, the administration's "Policy Statement on Admissions" contained proposals for revised admission policies that departed from these objectives and from all of the previous public Mission and Admissions statements made by the College and SUNY's Board of Trustees. Whereas previously the College pledged to serve, in broad terms, "the southeastern region of New York State," the new Policy Statement narrowly characterized the school's priority as accommodating "the three community colleges of Nassau and Suffolk counties" by reserving 80 percent of seats for transfers from those colleges.

The Statement raised other flags as well. It talked of the need to reduce the attrition rate, which it linked to skills deficiencies of current students, without attempting to identify the various causes of attrition or to contemplate appropriate remedies. The intent was transparent: the college was to be transformed to serve primarily as an upper division college for local transfer students in traditional programs. The skills issue would be addressed by reducing the lower division course demand and offerings, attrition would slow, financial aid pressures would decrease with more cash customers, and local communities would sigh with relief and thank their state government representatives for

the altered racial composition. In the response prepared by PES faculty chair, Gloria Young Sing, the Faculty denounced the Policy Statement, reminding the administration that the southeastern region of New York “includes Queens, Manhattan, the Bronx, Staten Island and Westchester County” [sic: no mention of Brooklyn in original] as well as Long Island’s counties, and that SUNY was a state-wide institution supported by the taxes of all residents.²⁰² Still, when the 1975-76 College Catalog appeared, all references to “traditionally by-passed,” to seeking racial, ethnic, and age balance in recruitment, and to Old Westbury’s commitment to demonstrating “the possibility of universal access” to higher education, were gone.

Students formed the Committee for Self-Defense, composed of representatives of campus organizations and non-affiliated individuals, and developed an information campaign to educate the student body about the erosion of the Mission. At meetings and public rallies, students aired their grievances about the inadequacies of academic programs and campus services, including poor housing and food. Some objected to having to vacate the dormitories during the December-January intercession; others wanted the college to fulfill its promise to institute a bilingual/bicultural program. Students wanted more extracurricular activities and reliable campus bus service.

The student Committee wanted to convince the Middle States Accreditation Team to evaluate and accredit the College based on its commitment to the “traditionally by-passed,” thereby reaffirming the original Mission. According to Ortiz, the Administration wanted the school to be accredited without emphasis on the Mission so that its plans for the metamorphosis of Old Westbury could proceed quietly and according to the new

²⁰² This document was found in the retired files of the Politics, Economics and Society Program at SUNY Old Westbury.

Master Plan. Student representatives spoke openly and extensively with the Middle States Team, sharing their dismay at the transition they knew was underway.²⁰³

Following three days of visits, the Middle States Team, comprised of university administrators and state officials, concluded that Old Westbury's future lay in its adherence to its original mission – to provide education to the traditionally by-passed:

“The team found the students of Old Westbury to be extraordinary in their enthusiasm and dedication to the institution. They identify with the college to the degree which is rare in contemporary education.... The positive attitude of the students...cuts across all differences in age and origin, and reflects the unusual quality of human relations and personal interaction between commuter and resident, older and younger students, and among all racial and ethnic groups. The team believes that this is an achievement unequaled on any other campus.”²⁰⁴

Significantly, the Middle States Team recognized the validity of students' concerns and, as a result, emphasized in their report the uniqueness and importance of the Mission at Old Westbury:

“The substantial progress made to date, if maintained and further developed, will lead to eventual accomplishments which will make Old Westbury a remarkable institution and, at the same time, will have major implications for higher education generally.... To maintain this balance is, in the opinion of the team, both the most important and the most difficult problem which the College faces during the coming year. In view of outside pressures, it can solve this problem only through substantial internal coherence and close collaboration between administration, faculty and students.”²⁰⁵

Students and faculty believed that the “outside pressures” cited by the Middle States team referred to local politicians who viewed the student population at Old Westbury as undesirable and who pressed SUNY's Board of Trustees to alter the Mission

²⁰³ “Report to the Faculty, Administration, Students, and College Council of the State University of New York College t Old Westbury,” by An Evaluation Team representing the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association, Prepared after Study of the Institution's Self-Evaluation Report and a Visit to the Campus on December 7 through December 10, 1975.

²⁰⁴ Middle States Report, p. 37-38

²⁰⁵ *ibid.*

(Manuel Ortiz, 8/1/06).²⁰⁶ For the next several months, the student Committee challenged the Administration to publicly recommit itself to the original Mission, with all its implications for admissions policy, curricula, and budget planning. President Maguire refused to reevaluate the Master Plan but promised to use the Middle States recommendations as a “guiding force in determining the future of Old Westbury.”²⁰⁷

On March 17, 1976, following a confrontation with Maguire and a campus rally, a group of students occupied and barricaded themselves in the building which housed the administrative offices of the college.²⁰⁸ Standing on the ledge outside Maguire’s office window, Ortiz promised students through a bullhorn the occupation would last until the Administration acquiesced. The student body responded favorably to the takeover, closing the school for six days and maintaining a vigil outside the occupied building. Faculty compliance with the strike was unanimous as was its vote to support the strike demands and student amnesty.²⁰⁹ Though students suspected that some members of his Administration advised differently, President Maguire refused to call police onto campus to forcibly remove students from the building and agreed to negotiate with a Student-Faculty Team.

After five days of negotiations, the administration signed an Agreement promising to: 1) revise the 1976 “Master Plan” to reflect the college’s original commitment to recruit and provide higher education to traditionally bypassed sectors of society; 2) establish a bilingual/bicultural program to serve the needs of native Spanish speakers and non-native speakers; 3) accommodate students and their families in year-

²⁰⁶ Colleen Sullivan, “Blacks Assail State U. Policies,” *New York Times*, September 7, 1975.

²⁰⁷ *Catalyst*, vol. 4, no. 7..

²⁰⁸ “Students Hold Protest Sit-Ins,” *New York Times*, March 19, 1976.

²⁰⁹ Faculty Resolutions, March 1976.

round housing; 4) support the continuation of the child-care center; and 5) maintain an admissions policy to uphold the Mission of the College.²¹⁰

Though some students were satisfied with the Strike Agreement signed on March 24, 1976, others were suspicious of the apparent total victory and doubted the Administration had the power to implement the Agreement. (Ortiz, 8/1/06; Suárez, 8/24/04). In order to maintain unity and to monitor the Agreement's implementation, students formed a Student Union with representatives from all campus clubs and independent students. Every student organization and academic club was represented; and all students were encouraged to join, with special attempts made to integrate commuter students who tended to be less active on campus.²¹¹ Student Union members participated with faculty and administration in the newly established Admissions Committee to rewrite the section on the Mission and Admissions Policy in the catalog.

Meanwhile, an immediate shared grievance of resident and commuter students was the poor quality and level of food service on campus. In a three-week boycott of the food service provider in the Fall 1976, students prepared and delivered meals, funded by donations, in what they called the "liberated" cafeteria zone. The Administration negotiated a service contract with a new company before the semester's end.

But by 1976 the College administration was no longer led by the liberal, peacekeeping administration of President Maguire (who took a year's sabbatical following the Spring strike). Maguire's Vice President Edward Todd, who was less sympathetic toward student activism and protest, became Acting President. Through the Fall 1976 and early Spring 1977 semesters, the Student Union held teach-ins and

²¹⁰ Strike Agreement 1976.

²¹¹ Student Union Constitution.

impromptu speak-outs on campus and distributed informational pamphlets about the administration's failure to implement the Strike Agreement. Acting President Todd responded by suspending the Codes for Campus Living that had been written by the student-faculty-administration Judiciary Committee and by invoking presidential "Rules of Public Order."²¹² These Rules gave Todd power to overrule decisions made by the joint faculty-student Judicial Review Committee and to intervene arbitrarily in any campus committee decision-making process. Students objected when the administration fired two popular faculty members despite unanimous faculty recommendations for reappointment, and again when the administration rejected the recommendations of the Admissions Committee and other committees set up to implement the strike agreement.²¹³

In the Spring 1977, the second student strike in a thirteen-month period ended in a more substantive victory for the student body. For nine days, students barricaded the entrances to the school and disrupted college operations, with the support of faculty, university workers, the Student Association of the State University (SASU) of New York and off-campus allies including the Economic Opportunity Council of Hempstead.²¹⁴

(Jaime Suárez, 8/24/04; Nancy Sutherland, 8/12/06) On the first day of the strike, Acting President Todd reported to the press:

“that the effect of the strike was ‘zero’ and that classes would continue as scheduled. But a visitor walking through the corridors of the university’s main classroom building found that few classes were in session and those that were meeting were discussing the

²¹² Philip Harvey [PES Faculty Member], “*Justice at Old Westbury*,” unpublished pamphlet.

²¹³ One of the fired activist instructors was Sam Anderson, currently Education Director at the Center for Law and Social Justice at CUNY’s Medgar Evers College.

²¹⁴ The records of SASU (1970-1985) are held at the Archives of Public Affairs and Policy, M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives, University Libraries, University at Albany, State University of New York. Resolutions in support of Old Westbury student strikes are contained in Series 6: Subject Files, 1970-1981, Box 8.

issues in the strike.”²¹⁵

This time, at the request of students and faculty who refused to meet with the campus administration, SUNY Central representatives came to Old Westbury to negotiate directly with students.²¹⁶ Several members of MINP/FEP were among the student leaders. (Ortiz, 8/1/06; Suárez, 8/24/04; Sutherland, 8/12/06) They helped form the Student Union, participated in the Student-Faculty Negotiating Team, and served on the Student Government Association (SGA). FEP members provided support services to the student organizations, including transportation and security. They wrote, printed, and distributed informational bulletins and spoke at rallies.²¹⁷ FEP urged non-profit organizations in Nassau County and students on other campuses to join the picket lines. The events received both national and international media attention.²¹⁸ Nine days later, a second strike agreement was reached:

“The settlement came after a 15-hour negotiating session between students and representatives of the State University system. According to student negotiators, state officials agreed to adopt ‘affirmative-action goals’ at the college that would strive to establish that at least half the students would be female, that the median age of the students be over 25 and that the black, Hispanic and white components of the college be of equal size.”²¹⁹

It was not a complete victory – the language used to support the Mission in the Agreement was not as strong as students wanted; not all desired improvements and restoration of cuts were secured; and faculty member Sam Anderson was not reinstated. But faculty members on the Negotiating Team exhorted students to relent, arguing that

²¹⁵ “State University at Old Westbury Boycotted in Dispute on Minority Admissions.” *New York Times*, April 19, 1977.

²¹⁶ It is important to note that, by this time, Governor Carey had replaced Nelson Rockefeller.

²¹⁷ For example, “Getting it Together,” “The Spring ‘Offensive,’” “Present Situation: February 1977,” PATBDC.

²¹⁸ Marjorie Kaplan, “Tass Dispatch Misses the Point,” *Newsday*, May 4, 1977.

²¹⁹ Ari L. Goldman, “Students in State U. End Nine-Day Strike.” *New York Times*, April 27, 1977.

nothing more was attainable. Students gave in, and the second Agreement was signed on April 27, 1977.²²⁰

Two opposing interests collided at Old Westbury. On the one hand, savvy New York State and SUNY officials were responding to a state budget crisis and the pressures from Long Island legislators to change the non-traditional character, population, and academic curricula at the school. On the other hand, relatively inexperienced students, aware of their precarious situation, were determined to defend their right to accessible higher education. The central element of the students' strategy for victory was their use of disruptive protest tactics, typical in students protests in the period, risking police intervention.²²¹

The other important components included the coalition students forged with faculty and the support gained from off-campus allies, including a coalition of twenty-five minority organizations, who empathized with the students' cause.²²² Former student leader and MINP member Ortiz thought that, despite local legislators' desire to turn the campus into an upper-division college for Long Island transfer students from community colleges, the multi-ethnic student unity on campus and Governor Hugh Carey's reluctance to have the police forcefully remove students from occupied buildings were also key to students' success. Also, recalled Ortiz, "One of our greatest strengths was the fact that the older, suburban White women taking classes on campus were as determined as the rest of us to win. They prepared our meals in the cafeteria and stayed with us the whole time" (Manuel Ortiz, 8/1/06). The persistence of a core of radical students, who

²²⁰ Ari L. Goldman, "Students in State U. End Nine-Day Strike," *New York Times*, April 27, 1977.

²²¹ Photographs in the student newspaper, *The Catalyst*, show students lying across campus roads to prevent cars from passing, barricading entrances, and standing on ledges outside the occupied building.

²²² Colleen Sullivan, "Blacks Assail State U. Policies," *New York Times*, September 7, 1975.

pressed students to form a Student Union, who sought alliances and support outside the campus gates, and who provided the propaganda on and off campus on student grievances, helped prevent students from demobilizing after the first strike agreement was signed. Students became aware that, across race and gender, their political identities could and did coincide with positive results.

MINP's dual purposes were reflected in its Old Westbury experience in two ways: one which contributed to its short-term growth and another which helps account for its eventual decline. Besides helping the students press their grievances, MINP's goal was to recruit members through its student arm, FEP. The Old Westbury campus, like other campuses in the city, was a fruitful recruiting ground which expanded the Long Island, Lower East Side, and Upper Manhattan chapters. But by this time, the lofty goal of contributing to a national revolutionary movement had turned into an exaggerated sense of what one organization could accomplish, causing individual members to be scattered in multiple local environments, some openly representing MINP (or FEP) and some not, with no consistent assessment of how to link these various efforts. According to former leading member Jaime Suárez, "FEP [often] didn't take up campus struggles as FEP. We were there as members of the mass organization."

The reluctance to establish an organizational presence was partly based on the concern about government infiltration and security of members. More fundamentally, though, it was rooted in two Leninist principles of a cadre organization. First was the idea that the cadre organization should be comprised of "advanced elements" who are recruited from mass struggles based on their revolutionary commitment; second was the notion that these "advanced" cadres should then integrate themselves into mass struggles

through the existing organizations. Consequently, though the leadership of FEP discussed the activism of its members on different campuses, the membership never coordinated its political actions or developed a program for youth activism.

Coalition to Save Metropolitan Hospital

By late 1978, the severe budget cuts implemented to help New York City service its bank debt had already minimized services and reduced funding for public schools, daycare centers, hospitals, transportation, sanitation, fire services, and city colleges. Yet, in December 1978, the Koch Administration proposed a further reduction of the municipal hospital budget of \$1.2 billion by 10 percent. In support of the city's plan, Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* published a biased editorial against the poor in New York City, declaring that the city's major problem was the burden of providing health care and services to "thousands of welfare recipients and transient illegal aliens."²²³ The article racialized the fiscal crisis by reserving its most vicious remarks for Puerto Ricans:

"[T]he city's hospitals should not be an extension of the welfare system, paying substantially above the welfare rate for thousands of Puerto Ricans who have made this their special preserve."²²⁴

In response, the Coalition in Defense of the Puerto Rican and Hispanic Rights (CDPRHR) formed in January 1979. According to MINP,

"The groups which have united...are very diverse. They include... the Hispanic Church of God and political organizations such as ourselves and the PSP. There are also tenant groups and students, ...workers..., city council members, state senators and assemblymen from the Latin communities."²²⁵

²²³ "Major Operation," *New York Post*, December 27, 1978.

²²⁴ *ibid.*

²²⁵ "Coalition Forms to Defend Hispanic Rights," *Obreros en Marcha*, Vol. IV, No. 1, March 1979: 8.

In its 1979 “Strategic Perspective and Proposed Workplan,” the CDPRHR talked about the conditions it wanted to address:

“Rents are unaffordable: entire communities are threatened with extinction as ‘planned shrinkage’ seeks to make room for luxury housing. The policies of the last two city administrations have sought to ‘balance’ the city budget by closing hospitals in our communities or severely reducing their budgets, eliminating after-school programs, laying off thousands of teachers, closing our bilingual programs and drastically reducing the number of interpreters found [in] social services programs. As social unrest climbs with the erosion of our standard of living, the people of our communities also find their legal and constitutional rights...violated by the excessive or unwarranted use of force by police authorities.”²²⁶

The CDPRHR formed six New York City Chapters in its attempt to mount effective city-wide opposition to those conditions; MINP representatives participated in each chapter, with Julio Pabón, Emilio Morante, and Pedro Cordero serving as coordinators of the Bronx, East Harlem, and Lower East Side chapters, respectively. It identified three ways to pursue its objectives: first, it would attend public meetings and hearings where city officials were scheduled to appear to defend budget-balancing policies. Second, it would hold educational forums in neighborhoods throughout the city. Third, it would hold street rallies to demonstrate opposition to city policies.²²⁷

One of the CDPRHR’s most significant accomplishments was the Coalition to Save Metropolitan Hospital in East Harlem, formed in response to Koch’s announcement that the 10 percent cut of municipal hospital funding, coming on the heels of prior cuts, would be accomplished by laying off more workers and closing four of seventeen municipal hospitals, including Sydenham Hospital in Harlem, Metropolitan Hospital in East Harlem, Greenpoint Hospital in the Williamsburg-Greenpoint section of Brooklyn,

²²⁶ Document included in files of CDPRHR, PATBDC.

²²⁷ *ibid.*

and Cumberland Hospital in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn. Throughout the city prior layoffs, mainly of maintenance workers and nurses' aides, had hit black and Latino employees hardest; and supply shortages had compromised the quality of patient care.²²⁸ The city characterized the new proposal as an efficient measure to reduce the excessive number of municipal hospital beds.²²⁹

The Council of Municipal Hospital Community Advisory Boards accused the city of trying to fill empty beds in private hospitals by closing municipal hospitals which, in effect, would slash access to medical care of residents without private or public health insurance. The claim was based on public statements by the Health and Hospitals Corporation, on the reports of investigative journalists on Mayor Koch's "Plan for Improving the Effectiveness of Hospital Services in New York City," as well as on public objections to the cuts and closings by doctors and staff at the hospitals. For instance, in July 1979, the Village Voice reported that, despite its designation by the federal government as a medically underserved area, the densely populated East Harlem community was to absorb nearly \$10 million of a \$30.5 million cut, by redirecting Metropolitan Hospital's tens of thousands of in- and out-patients to voluntary hospitals in other neighborhoods. The nearest municipal hospital, Sydenham in Harlem, would also be closed.²³⁰ The same report noted that board members of Mt. Sinai and Lenox Hill Hospitals, which would receive most of Metropolitan's Medicare and Medicaid patients,

²²⁸ Letter from Camille Mallouh, M.D., President of the Medical Board of Metropolitan Hospital Center to Joseph C. Hoffman, President, New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation.

²²⁹ The data reported in this section was extracted from the voluminous files of the Coalition to Save Metropolitan Hospital, containing copies of original correspondence between Metropolitan Hospital's Medical Board New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation, the Newsletters of the Coalition, the Newsletters of the Community Action for Legal Services, numerous articles from the *Daily News*, *Village Voice*, *New York Times*, *El Diario-La Prensa*, and *City Limits*.. The Coalition files will be submitted to the archives at CUNY's Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College.

²³⁰ Village Voice, 7/30/79.

were “among the mayor’s heaviest campaign contributors.” A local paper, the *Westsider*, reported the same information.²³¹ The leadership of District Council 37, AFSCME, representing 23,000 municipal hospitals workers, also denounced the cuts.²³² In January 1979, the Committee for Interns and Residents, representing approximately 2,000 doctors in the municipal system, defied a court injunction and staged a one-day walkout at seventeen municipal hospitals to protest the layoffs and hospital closings.²³³ Nurses and other employees from D.C. 37 joined the doctors on the picket line at several of the hospitals.

EC reported, analyzed, and opposed the health care cuts through the pages of *Obreros en Marcha* and in the bulletins of its local chapters around the city, while the CDPRHR mobilized East Harlem residents against the closing of Metropolitan Hospital.²³⁴ The Coalition’s investigations taught the organizers not to count on union leadership for unreserved support for keeping the hospital open. Though D.C. 37 publicly denounced the budget cuts, its leadership made no attempt to educate employees or to provide resources for the struggle against the hospital closing.

“One of the things [we] learned [was] that although some of the union representatives [were] excellent, very committed, and very active, ...the vast majority of the membership [was] not at all informed of what [was] happening in the hospital. The union [was] very careful about collecting your dues...but aside from that you [heard] very little from them....”²³⁵

²³¹ *Westsider*, June 1979. The photocopy of this article in the Coalition files does not contain the title or day of the article. PATBDC.

²³² PATBDC.

²³³ For four days in March 1975, the militant Committee of Interns and Residents staged “the first major strike ever” by U.S. doctors to protest working conditions and substandard patient care at New York City voluntary and municipal hospitals. See “Doctors on Strike.” *Time Magazine* March 31, 1975.

²³⁴ PATBDC, containing MINP and Coalition reports, articles, and informational pamphlets.

²³⁵ Interview with “R.E.”, *Obreros en Marcha*, Vol. 5 no. 3 (April/May 1980): 3-4.

For nearly two years, Emilio Morante represented MINP and the CDPRHR in the Coalition to Save Metropolitan Hospital, which sought to unify hospital workers, community residents, neighborhood and citywide organizations, and elected political representatives against the Koch administration. Elise Rackmill, a hospital social worker, provided the initial connection between the community activists and hospital staff (Emilio Morante, 5/4/06). Within the first several months, the Coalition had twenty-three member groups as well as individual political activists:

“Once a core group of us got together, the first thing we did was to investigate what was happening not only in the hospital but in the community, too.... We found that the more information you have concerning a particular issue and how the different groups in the community are relating to that problem, the better you can educate others. It’s then that you can put the issues squarely on the table and begin demanding solutions. It’s then that things come out in the open.”²³⁶

The Coalition formed an Employees’ Committee that met once a week to draw hospital workers into the Coalition. The employees then distributed the Coalition’s newsletter and leaflets to other workers at the hospital:

[We] found ourselves doing some basic union work... [and] because of the consistency and information provided by our Employees’ Committee, more workers [attended] those meetings than sporadic union meetings.”²³⁷ R.E.

The Coalition had little confidence, as well, that local politicians would staunchly oppose the city’s plan:

“I was elected by the representatives of the Coalition over a pool of politically connected individuals who threw their hat in the ring. I did not campaign at all. An overwhelming majority of the group simply believed that we had no hidden agenda, could be trusted, and reflected the genuine interests of the community in an uncompromising manner. We also waited out the internal

²³⁶ Interview with “G.L.”, *Obreros en Marcha*. Vol. 5 no. 3 (April/May 1980): 3-4.

²³⁷ Interview with “R.E.”, cited above.

battle that took place, where the local hacks exposed themselves. At the end of the meeting where the Coalition became a formal entity, the local councilman [Rodríguez] and [Congressman] Rangel were inauspiciously removed as the spokespersons for the community and we [MINP] were elected.” (Emilio Morante, 5/4/06)

Still, understanding the need to build a strong alliance, the Coalition invited Councilman Rodríguez to Coalition meetings and asked to work with him to save Metropolitan Hospital as a full-service medical center. But, according to Morante, the Councilman and other “politiqueros” of East Harlem did not like the Coalition’s confrontational tactics or the blame the Coalition placed on the Emergency Financial Control Board for acceding to the demands of large banking and financial institutions while sacrificing health care for the poor in New York City.

The perspective on the role of the Emergency Financial Control Board that MINP brought to the Coalition was shared with East Harlem’s residents through the Coalition’s leaflets and newsletters. Despite attempts by local politicians to red-bait and discredit the Coalition, Metropolitan Hospital remained open following an eighteen-month battle and state and federal bailout.

National and International Solidarity Networks

There was a flurry of activity at the national and international levels in the post-Assembly period. EC-MINP marched in rallies at national mobilizations in Washington, D.C. and New York against unemployment, recession, setbacks to affirmative action (such as the Bakke decision), the firing of the PATCO air traffic controllers, and for global disarmament.²³⁸ The four nationalist prisoners were finally released in 1979, and the Vieques Support Committee was launched. In the international arena, activists celebrated the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua in 1979, participated in CISPES

²³⁸ “Disarmament and the Latin Community,” Aug/Sept. 1982

(Committee in Support of the People of El Salvador) to stop U.S. aid to the military regime in El Salvador, joined the solidarity movement against apartheid in South Africa, and helped coordinate the first return trip to Cuba by the Antonio Maceo Brigade, comprised of children of emigrants. Attempting to illustrate the similarities between the struggles of Latinos in New York and those of other working people through the pages of its newspaper, *Obreros en Marcha (OEM)*, MINP urged support for striking mine workers and other rank-and-file movements of auto and steel workers in the nation, criticized reactionary union practices such as the role of the AFL-CIO in the CIA-sponsored AIFLD in Central America, and denounced the two-party dominance of electoral politics.

Solidarity with Puerto Rico

EC-MINP's solidarity with Puerto Rico took two concrete forms in this period. First, as in the first half of the decade, it sponsored and co-sponsored with other Left organizations public forums on the colonial relationship. MINP activists also helped to establish linkages between labor activists in both countries, especially through the U.S. Trade Union Committee Against Repression (U.S. TUCAR). During the 1978 strikes of electrical workers and municipal bus workers on the island, U.S. TUCAR and members of Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) sponsored a five-city speaking tour of labor activists from Puerto Rico at labor gatherings in the U.S., including an assembly of striking United Mine Workers in Pittsburgh. The same year, Frank Vergara of MINP and Jean Weisman, both representing TUCAR, brought union activists from the American Federation of Teachers in California, the United Mine Workers in Ohio, the International

Brotherhood of Electrical Workers in Chicago, the Service Employees in Boston, and D.C. 37 and Local 1199 in New York to meet labor activists in Puerto Rico.²³⁹

Second, MINP participated in mobilizations against U.S. government harassment, including FBI surveillance, Grand Jury subpoenas of independence supporters, and the prolonged imprisonment of the Puerto Rican Nationalists of the 1950s. During the second half of the 1970s, the Puerto Rico Solidarity Committee (PRSC), formed in 1975 by the Puerto Rican Left and other North American activists, became engaged in developing a national network in solidarity with Puerto Rico's independence movement. One of the solidarity network's greatest achievements was its campaign to secure the release of four Nationalists, who were released 1979.²⁴⁰

Campaigns to Free Political Prisoners

At the time of their release in 1979, Oscar Collazo, Irving Flores, Lolita Lebrón, and Rafael Cancel Miranda had served more than twenty-five years of life sentences in U.S. prisons for their acts of defiance against U.S. colonial occupation.²⁴¹ Andrés Figueroa Cordero, the fifth prisoner, was pardoned by President Jimmy Carter and released two years earlier because he was terminally ill.²⁴² The release of the other four followed nearly a decade of efforts by independence groups and thousands of supporters from across the United States.

²³⁹ See, "Puerto Rican Trade Unionists Tour U.S.," and "U.S. TUCAR Meets with Puerto Rican Trade Unions," *OEM*, vol. 3, no. 2, February 1978: 6-7; and *OEM*, vol. 3, no. 5, June 1978: 6, respectively.

²⁴⁰ The other occurred in 2003 at the U.S. Navy withdrawal from Puerto Rico's island of Vieques, after more than 60 years of occupation. The Vieques Solidarity Committee is discussed in Chapter 5.

²⁴¹ The Nationalists' actions are discussed in Chapter 2.

²⁴² First Lady Rosalyn Carter was scheduled to address the 18th Annual United Press International Conference in Puerto Rico on October 18, 1977. Though Cordero's release may have been timed to deter criticism of U.S. treatment of the Nationalists, a protest demonstration was held at the site of the Conference in Puerto Rico, featuring Figueroa Cordero as a main speaker. ("On the Nationalist Prisoners," *OEM*, vol. 2, no. 10, October 1977: 2.). Figueroa Cordero died on March 7, 1979, at the age of 54.

The movement to free the prisoners had been revived by the Young Lords (later PRRWO), El Comité, and PSP, in the early 1970s. In the prior two decades, efforts to secure the prisoners' freedom had been sporadic. Repression in Puerto Rico during the 1950s had severely weakened the movement there, and the climate for protest at that time was hardly better in the United States. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the independence movement in Puerto Rico rejuvenated, bringing the issue of the nationalist prisoners once again to the fore of activists' agendas.

“The Nationalists had been in prison for many years and they were largely forgotten. Somehow we met with the daughter of Oscar Collazo. She told us about her father and Carlos Feliciano [another prisoner]. Our work began around the case of Feliciano, and then we learned more about the other prisoners. We organized the activity in Washington [on October 30, 1973]. We were the leading force.”²⁴³
(Federico Lora, 6/18/04)

In 1970, El Comité organized the first Conference on Political Prisoners ever held in the United States (at Columbia University), co-sponsored with the Puerto Rican Student Union and the Young Lords. The conference marked the beginning of collaboration among these Puerto Rican radical organizations on this issue. On October 30, 1970, the twentieth anniversary of the Jayuya Rebellion, according to Melendez' account (2003, 192), ten thousand people marched from East Harlem to the United Nations calling for independence, freedom for political prisoners, and an end to police brutality in local neighborhoods. When the Young Lords' dissolved, mobilizing around the Nationalists' cause in New York City fell to El Comité, PRRWO, and PSP.

²⁴³ Feliciano, a cabinetmaker and resident of Williamsburg, Brooklyn since emigrating from Puerto Rico in 1955, was charged by police in 1970 with participating in 35 bombings but indicted only on two charges of attempted bombings, of an Army Recruiting Station in the Bronx and of the General Electric Building in Manhattan. He spent sixteen months in prison before his attorney, William Kunstler of the Center for Constitutional Rights, secured his release on bail, and was acquitted on the first charge in 1972. In 1973, although acquitted of charges of attempted arson or placement of a bomb at the GE building, he was convicted of possession of explosives. See, “Bombing Suspect is Acquitted Here” and “Bomb Case Figures Found Guilty Here,” *New York Times*, June 24, 1972 and September 19, 1973, respectively.

“If you read history of the movement, it appears as though the Young Lords were the catalysts behind the Nationalists’ release. Instead of saying we worked as a coalition, [some accounts] look at everything in terms of the Young Lords. PRRWO is never mentioned either, probably because it was a negative experience for the Lords. We didn’t try to get our name in the media. Our attitude was that we just wanted to move this thing along.” (Carmen Martell, 6/18/04)

“The Nationalists’ release was really El Comité’s greatest achievement.... We did it for the cause, not to get credit. We got involved and just worked and worked and worked.” (Orlando Colón, 6/18/04)

The Committee to Defend and Free Political Prisoners (El Comité Pro Defensa y Libertad de Presos Políticos) formed in October 1971 to coordinate an effective campaign to free political prisoners and to support other pro-independence activists. The Committee sought participation from individuals and organizations interested in aiding political prisoners and from families of prisoners. As a result of the FBI’s Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), dozens of activists were accused of various crimes, and jailed for violations such as failure to report to the armed forces for physical examination and induction,²⁴⁴ or failure to testify before a Grand Jury.²⁴⁵ One of the Committee’s first sustained endeavors was to hold rallies in front of the courtrooms where activists’ hearings were held. As local artists (or “cultural workers,” as they called themselves) joined the growing movement, live music could be heard often at the rallies featuring original song lyrics that spoke of strong bonds with those accused. Artists created drawings depicting the plight of prisoners; and activists reproduced these as posters and sold to raise money for prisoners’ defense and family support. If one missed the poems of

²⁴⁴ The case of Pablo “Yoruba” Guzmán of the Young Lords is one example.

²⁴⁵ Defendants charged with refusing to testify before a Grand Jury were frequently defended by the Center for Constitutional Rights on the grounds that the Grand Jury subpoenas were “fishing expeditions” and violated the constitutional rights of citizens as witnesses were not permitted to have attorneys present at their testimonies. See *OEM* collection, PATBDC.

empathy and solidarity delivered at the rallies, these could be heard on any given night at the Nuyorican Poets' Café in the Lower East Side.²⁴⁶

The courthouse rallies were not well received by official security forces, local police, and judges. Often as a rally or picket occurred on the outside, sympathizers of defendants lined up on the inside to be admitted to hearings. Spectators were frequently ordered out of the courtrooms. On one occasion in December 1971 at the sentencing hearing of Eduardo (Pancho) Cruz and Wilfredo (Goody) Meléndez, several hundred friends of the defendants lined up at the door of the New York State Supreme Court hearing room an hour before the scheduled start. After a half hour wait, the court guard announced only the immediate families, attorneys and a few supporters would be permitted to enter – 24 people in all. The rest were left waiting outside, behind barricades that guarded the court entrance. Inside the courtroom, sixteen policemen were dispersed among the rows of seating, each bench with a detective. The defendants were escorted into court by four police officers. Cruz and Meléndez, convicted of weapons' possession, claimed through their attorneys that the trial was flawed by fraud and frame-up and further that the court had no jurisdiction over Puerto Rican nationalists.²⁴⁷

There were dozens of public courtroom displays of solidarity with Puerto Rican activists in other cities as well, in which police forces and the FBI were accused of fabricating evidence, provoking disturbances, falsifying correspondence, and other acts meant to intimidate activists.²⁴⁸ For several years, independently and often in close

²⁴⁶ The artists included mainly Puerto Ricans and other Latin Americans, but also Black and White performers. Veterans of the movement may recall Noel Hernández' poem, *Cinco Hermanos*; Richie Havens' appearance on more than one occasion, along with those of Mike Glick, José Valdés, and Bernardo Palombo, to name a few.

²⁴⁷ *Unidad Latina*, Dec. 20, 1971-Jan. 3, 1972, p. 7.

²⁴⁸ Ramon Bosque-Pérez, "Political Persecution against Puerto Rican Anti-Colonial Activists in the Twentieth Century," in *Puerto Rico Under Colonial Rule: Political Persecution and the Quest for Human*

collaboration, Left groups (mainly but not exclusively Puerto Rican in composition) held educational conferences in community halls, school auditoriums, and churches to publicize the prolonged incarceration of the Nationalists and persecution of other activists. They organized marches, rallies, and fundraisers, urged state and federal elected officials to discuss the issue, and called upon the United Nations Decolonization Committee at its annual meeting to urge the unconditional release of prisoners by the U.S. government. The march held in Washington, D.C. in 1973 was the largest public demonstration to that date held for that purpose. Each year at the Puerto Rican Day Parade, contingents carrying banners with the slogan, “Libertad Para los Presos Políticos” (Freedom for Political Prisoners), marched up Fifth Avenue; and information tables were set up at cultural festivals in Central Park.²⁴⁹

EC-MINP’s comments when Andrés Figueroa Cordero was released in 1977 indicated the conscious design of building a broad-based movement:

“While heartened by and cognizant of the importance of Andrés Figueroa Cordero’s release, [there remains] an urgent need to redouble our efforts to obtain the freedom of the remaining Nationalist prisoners.... [T]he demand for the unconditional release...must be translated...into a mass movement in this country...with the active involvement of broad sectors of society, including workers, students, intellectuals, and church sectors....”²⁵⁰

Under the auspices of the PRSC, a national mobilization commemorating the 27th Anniversary of the Jayuya Rebellion and advocating freedom for all political prisoners and an end to Grand Jury investigations into progressive organizations, took place in

Rights, Ramón Bosque-Pérez and José Javier Colón Morera, eds. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006).

²⁴⁹ Original photographs, duplications of which appear in Addendum # , will be turned over to the Center for Puerto Rican Studies upon deposit of the dissertation.

²⁵⁰ “On the Nationalist Prisoners,” *OEM*, vol. 2, no. 10, October 1977: 2.

Washington, D.C. on October 30, 1977. The next march in Washington occurred on March 3, 1979 (several days before Figueroa Cordero died in Puerto Rico).²⁵¹

In late 1978, one of New York City's major Spanish-language newspapers, *El Diario-LaPrensa*, ran a sympathetic series of articles on the Puerto Rican nationalists' actions in the 1950s. The series was part of a loosely-connected campaign organized by social and political groups in Puerto Rico and the U.S. to increase attention to the issue and to petition the U.S. government for the prisoners' release. The campaign attained legitimacy as more mainstream sectors in both Puerto Rico and the U.S. joined it. Four former governors of Puerto Rico,²⁵² all four of the island's major political parties, church groups, labor unions, and student clubs in both countries publicly endorsed the campaign. Both Houses of the Puerto Rican legislature passed resolutions demanding freedom for the four remaining prisoners. Former U.S. Congressman from New York, Robert García, and ten other legislators, added their endorsements in a letter to President Carter requesting the release.²⁵³

Puerto Rico may have been a low priority for President Carter, but "human rights" placed high in his public discourse. The U.S. had only recently withdrawn from Vietnam, and the revelations of wartime atrocities had not abated. Watergate had not yet dimmed in the national memory either (especially with President Ford's pardon of Richard Nixon). Civil war was raging in Nicaragua, and the U.S. faced accusations of support for brutal military regimes in Central and South America. President Carter wanted to be a "peacemaker" (particularly in the Middle East) and champion of human rights. His administration hinted that the Nationalists might be released as a "humanitarian gesture"

²⁵¹ *ibid.* and "Editorial," *OEM*, vol. IV, no. 1, March 1979: 2.

²⁵² These Governors were Hernández Colón, Sánchez-Villela, Ferre, and Muñoz-Marín.

²⁵³ "Editorial," *OEM*, vol. 4, no. 7, September-October 1979: 1-2.

if they agreed to restrict their political activities. They did not agree to any conditions; but Carter relented anyway, releasing the prisoners on September 11, 1979.

Oscar Collazo made this statement the day before the release:

“Our intent, after our release, will be to dedicate ourselves to Puerto Rican national unity, completely confident that this historical moment will serve as a stimulus to the Puerto Rican people to put aside partisan flags and struggles for the only solution – to recover the inalienable political rights of our people, so that the Puerto Rican nation can soon take its place among the free nations of the world.”²⁵⁴

The Puerto Rican Left of the 1970s differed on how to pursue their shared hopes for Puerto Rico. However, the prolonged effort to free those they viewed as political prisoners was not one of those areas where differences hindered cooperation. In most cases, whether or not prisoner releases were obtained (and the results varied), the accounts of movement-building by EC-MINP members indicate the importance the Left placed on building solidarity movements, particularly in the case of the 1950s Nationalists.

A contrasting interpretation of the campaign to free the prisoners is that “reactions to the shootings [in Puerto Rico and the U.S.] was highly unsympathetic” and that most Puerto Ricans thought the nationalists got what they deserved” (Cruz 1998, 44). In the absence of statistical surveys and perhaps judging by the low level of public support for independence in plebiscites in Puerto Rico, that may have been true. But it is difficult to imagine that the release would have been secured without the broad support of many Puerto Ricans and others; and thousands of people attended celebrations and receptions in New York and Chicago upon their release in 1979.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁴ Collazo, as quoted in *OEM*, vol. IV, no. 7, September-October 1979:2.

²⁵⁵ *ibid.*

U.N. Decolonization Committee Hearings

In 1960, the United Nations' General Assembly passed Resolution 1514(XV) which declares, in part, that "All peoples have the right to self-determination; ...[and] Immediate steps shall be taken, in ...all...territories which have not yet gained independence, to transfer all powers to the peoples of those territories, without any conditions or reservations...." A twenty-four nation-member committee, commonly known as the Special U.N. Committee on Decolonization, was established to monitor the implementation of the Resolution.²⁵⁶ Though they were original members of the Decolonization Committee, the United States, Australia, and Britain resigned in 1971 in protest of Resolution 2649 (XXV), proposed by the Decolonization Committee and passed by the General Assembly in 1970. In Resolution 2649, the United Nations General Assembly

"Affirms the legitimacy of the struggle of peoples under colonial and alien domination recognized as being entitled to the right of self-determination *to restore to themselves that right by any means at their disposal*;

"Recognizes the right of peoples under colonial and alien domination in the legitimate exercise of their right to self-determination *to seek and receive all kinds of moral and material assistance*, in accordance with the resolutions of the United Nations and the spirit of the Charter of the United Nations;

"Calls upon all Governments that deny the right to self-determination of peoples under colonial and alien domination to recognize and observe that right in accordance with the relevant international instruments and the principles and spirit of the Charter;

"Considers that the acquisition and retention of territory in contravention of the right of the people of that territory to self-determination is inadmissible and a gross violation of the Charter;

"Condemns those Governments that deny the right to self-determination of peoples recognized as being entitled to it, especially of the peoples of southern

²⁵⁶ Its designated title at the time was "Special Committee on the Situation with Regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples."

Africa and Palestine;...” (U.N. General Assembly 1915th plenary meeting, 30 November 1970).

Although it joined its allies in walking off the Decolonization Committee, the U.S. was not deeply concerned at the time about how the United Nations would treat the U.S.-Puerto Rico relationship. In 1953, when the Commonwealth status was established in Puerto Rico, the U.S. had successfully petitioned the United Nations to remove Puerto Rico from its list of colonies and territories, thereby providing the basis in later years for the U.S. to assert in the United Nations that affairs relating to Puerto Rico were domestic, not international, concerns.

On August 18, 1972, approximately 2,000 (according to participants) demonstrators rallied outside the United Nations while Cuba’s Permanent Representative to the U.N., Ricardo Alarcón Quesada, proposed a resolution to the Decolonization Committee recognizing Puerto Rico as a colony and affirming its right to self-determination.²⁵⁷ When the resolution passed unanimously several days later, the coalition of third world activists, including El Comité, PSP, PRRWO, the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP), I Wor Kuen, and the Black Workers Congress, characterized the victory as a new opening to gain international attention and support for the cause of independence and an opportunity for the United States to resolve the issue peacefully. In his presentation at the rally, James Forman of the Black Workers Congress announced that “People’s Solidarity Day” was being celebrated in places around the world on that day and called for “third world unity” in the United States.”²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ For crowd estimate, see “Puerto Rico Ante Foro Internacional,” *Unidad Latina*, Vol. 2, No. 10, Aug. 27-Sept. 10, 1972: 2-3; on the presentation and passage of the resolution, see “Puerto Rican Sovereignty Backed in U.N.” and “Independence Groups Pleased,” *New York Times*, August 29, 1973.

²⁵⁸ “Puerto Rico Ante Foro Internacional,” *Unidad Latina*, Vol. 2, No. 10, Aug. 27-Sept. 10, 1972: 11.

The annual hearings of the U.N. Decolonization Committee thereafter have provided opportunities for representatives from Puerto Rico and other parts of the world, and from the U.S.-based solidarity movement to present the colonial case of Puerto Rico in that international forum. Every year since 1972, the U.N. Decolonization Committee has passed similar resolutions – consistently recognizing Puerto Rico’s right to self-determination and calling on the U.S. to take immediate steps to recognize Puerto Rico’s sovereignty. Moreover, the resolutions at various times have called on the U.S. to release Nationalist prisoners, to cease military activities in and around Puerto Rico, to remove the U.S. Navy from Vieques, and (in recent years) to clean up the toxic waste and remedy the environmental hazards caused by the naval occupation.

PRSC activists, including EC-MINP, defined the campaign to persuade the U.N. Decolonization Committee to take these measures as one strategy in a multi-pronged approach to building a strong solidarity movement of international proportion. While the staunch anti-colonial perspective of PRSC may not have drawn vast crowds of participants to public rallies, the multi-ethnic, multi-national campaign succeeded each year in expanding the size of the delegation appearing at the U.N. hearings to urge the passage of strongly worded resolutions. With a National Board of Directors comprised of representatives from all of the major Puerto Rican pro-independence organizations (including EC-MINP and PSP), as well as from the National Lawyers Guild, the National Conference of Black Lawyers, the Center for Constitutional Rights, the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organizations, and a host of others, PRSC was granted permission by the U.N. Decolonization Committee to present its Statement at the U.N., which it did from 1975 to 1982. Though the PRSC eventually disbanded, in 2007 more

than forty individuals and organizations made presentations at the U.N. Decolonization Committee hearing, which was double the number in 2006 and included representatives from every major political party – including the pro-statehood New Progressive Party (PNP).

Conclusion

The cadre organization approached political action differently than the community organization of the earlier years. Individual members of MINP were expected to encourage mobilization around local issues in their neighborhoods, schools, or workplaces by supporting the creation of mass organizations, in alliance with broad sectors who could agree on limited principles of unity. In most cases, the individual activists initially concealed their affiliation with MINP or identity as communists to avoid the tactic of red-baiting by potential opponents. The MINP affiliation was to be revealed gradually and as the activist had attained the respect and trust of the mass group.

As in the cases of students fighting cuts at Old Westbury and East Harlem residents opposing the closing of Metropolitan Hospital, the perspective MINP brought to these campaigns fit neither the mold of traditional class politics, which seeks workers' unity against capitalists and the state, nor the approach of ethnic identity-based political incorporation. In both campaigns, broad alliances once again contributed to victories, even if somewhat limited.

El Comité had begun to share this perspective as it developed in prior years. But in this period, MINP used its printed propaganda more purposively to pursue its dual goal. Chapter-wide bulletins were designated as “agitational” whereas *Obreros en Marcha* served as a strategic, educational tool. Also, as an openly communist

organization, MINP was more careful about exposing its activists in local campaigns to red-baiting and marginalization. Individuals often revealed their affiliation gradually, usually after gaining credibility in particular campaigns as individuals. (Jaime Suárez, 3/18/06) These activities had several implications for MINP in this period. The first was that it propelled the organization into another level of political activism – affected its propaganda – *OEM* became a more sophisticated political journal, written more for the left but still distributed in the projects; affected recruitment – more ideologically committed activists joined but narrowed the pool of potential recruits at the local level who were at the same level of commitment and analysis; and pulled people away from local base. In a way, this was an inevitable outcome of its structural understanding of class relations – it believed, ultimately, that the struggle against capitalism was national, not local; and that speaking out against imperialism was part of its obligation as Marxist activists. One could argue, at the very least, that international solidarity by the Left during this period helped to draw international attention, and several positive outcomes, to the struggles of movements for democratization. But activism at the local level did not have the attention of the organization as it had in early periods. This situation was complicated by the fact that participation with the left led to the additional focus on “party-building.”

Some members were removed from local political campaigns and mass organizations in order to represent MINP on solidarity committees, to help produce a more sophisticated newspaper, or to engage in debates over political perspectives with like-minded organizations. As it grew, MINP no longer mobilized the entire organization, or even entire chapters, to actively support each local campaign as, for example, the

Young Lords had done in its garbage offensive or as El Comité did for Operation Move-In. Consequently, El Comité-MINP did not become well recognized, as El Comité had been on the Upper West Side, as a citywide, independent political force.

Though the transition was gradual and, at the time, unacknowledged, by the end of the period fewer members were directly involved in local political work relative to the number involved in coalitions of the Left, in propaganda development, in coordinating communications with affiliates outside New York City, and eventually in party-building (Jaime Suárez, 3/18/06). In Chapter 5, the relationship between these developments and MINP's disintegration will be explored.

CHAPTER 5: INTERACTION OF STRUCTURAL CHANGE AND CADRE DILEMMAS

One great error we committed was to be young...
We got caught up in political work, which did not
permit us a single moment for reflection.”²⁵⁹

Fernández Huidobro, Tupamaros

Introduction

A combination of structural and internal organizational factors explains the disintegration of EC-MINP over a period of several years in the early 1980s. The economic, political, and ideological environment in which the militant, community-based group of Puerto Ricans became politicized in 1970 had changed – locally, nationally, and internationally – by 1980, which negatively affected the opportunities for successful outcomes in local protest politics and underscored the unlikelihood that anti-capitalist politics would flourish in the United States in the near future.

At the local level, the city’s business development policies accommodated and encouraged the ascendancy of the financial, insurance, and real estate sectors, and escalated the gentrification of Manhattan (Sassen 2001). The Koch administration allocated a smaller share of budgetary resources to redistributive services and reduced city hall’s interest in quality-of-life concerns of lower income and minority sectors (Mele 2000; Mollenkopf 1992). Even scholars who characterize Koch’s handling of the city’s fiscal crisis as “successful” acknowledge that his “rhetoric before the media was seen by some as pandering to white biases or as unnecessarily unsympathetic to minority concerns” (Brecher and Horton 1993, 99). Deindustrialization, the transition to a service-

²⁵⁹ Quote of Fernández Huidobro, leading member of Uruguay’s *Tupamaros*, 1986, cited in Wolfgang S. Heinz and Hugo Frühling, *Determinants of Gross Human Rights Violations by State and State-Sponsored Actors in Brazil, Uruguay, Chile and Argentina 1960-1990* (The Hague: Martinus Nuhoff Publishers, 1999): 247.

based economy, and the increasing influence of conservative politics nationally reinvigorated the material and ideological assault on workers' rights, affirmative action, and the ideas of economic entitlement and cultural pluralism (Edsall and Edsall 1992; Ehrenberg 2006; Marable 1991; Zweig 2004). Following the end of the Vietnam War, the Reagan-era championing of corporate deregulation and the virtues of the free market promoted an image of the corporate sector as freedom-riders for international prosperity. Anti-communist rhetoric was used to justify overt support for military regimes and right-wing political forces throughout Latin America, especially in the early Reagan years (Jonas 1991), as well as covert aid to right-wing, anti-communist insurgencies (as in Nicaragua and Afghanistan).

On the Left, by the early 1970s organizations such as the Black Panthers' Party and the Young Lords that inspired Third-World and White activists had dissolved or splintered into smaller groups (Melendez 2002; Pulido 2006, 104). By the end of the decade, many of the groups they influenced were themselves weakened or destroyed by in-fighting and the burn-out of intense activism.²⁶⁰

Despite these changes – many of which MINP reflected on in its newspaper, *Obreros en Marcha*²⁶¹ – the organization remained loyal to its rhetoric about class solidarity and proletarian revolution. The speech delivered by First Secretary Victor Quintana at the Tenth Anniversary Celebration of MINP in 1980 referred to what he regarded as MINP's greatest strength: "...a morality and determination rooted in a

²⁶⁰ These organizations are discussed further in comparisons to MINP later in the chapter.

²⁶¹ For examples, see "Steel Workers: Growing Unemployment," "Stagflation: New Twist in U.S. Economy," "1980 Presidential Elections: Candidates Agree on Increased U.S. Militarism;" "The New Right: Old Ideas in a New Context;" "Reaganomics;" "Free Enterprise Zones: No Solution;" in *Obreros en Marcha*, November 1977, October 1978, March 1980, November/December 1980, April/May June 1982, and August/September 1982, respectively, PATBDC.

commitment to revolutionary change and serving people.”²⁶² Pointing to the history of EC-MINP, Quintana emphasized the importance the group continued to place on grassroots activism:

“Our experience has shown us the need to have a close relationship with the people, to be a part of their struggles, and to learn from them. In fact it was their struggles that gave rise to MINP.... We have consistently tried to impress upon other Marxist-Leninists in this country the importance of rooting our movement [in] the working class and the oppressed – not as an end in itself, but rather as the only concrete basis upon which to build a revolutionary process in this country.”²⁶³

But the sudden, unexpected split between MINP’s members in January 1981 tore the organization in half, leaving the remaining members (and those who left) demoralized and discouraged.

Chapter 5 focuses on elements of MINP’s political practice and internal dynamics in its final years that weakened the organization and led to its dissolution. The frenetic pace of multiple endeavors that exhausted members, along with the inflexibility of democratic centralism, kept the organization from assessing and adjusting to the changing political environment and emerging political differences. By complicating the structure with multiple layers and separate units, communication among members became difficult and highly centralized, leading to a gradual disconnect between the leadership and the base as well as between leading members themselves. Staunch opposition to participating in electoral politics excluded MINP from a popular arena, especially at the local level, for presenting alternative perspectives and reform proposals. In emphasizing proletarian revolution against the state in most of its propaganda, MINP (as a whole) became

²⁶² Victor Quintana, “*Presentation of the First Secretary of MINP-El Comité*,” July 19, 1980.

²⁶³ Also from Victor Quintana’s “*Presentation*,” reprinted in *Obreros en Marcha*, Vol. 5 No. 6 (August 1980): 4-5, PATBDC.

detached from arenas where it might have contributed to a broader discussion of diverse paths to democratization.

I draw on interviews in which former members reflected on these issues as they relate to MINP's declining relevance in the communities where it originated and flourished. Based on comparative studies, I also draw parallels between the experiences of MINP and other organizations of the "Third World Left"²⁶⁴ and the Left in general in the United States. The analysis of MINP's final years reveals the difficulties Puerto Rican Left activists faced, similar to Blacks, Chicanos, and Asian Americans, in organizations where ideological intransigence obstructed their ability to seek effective strategies for mounting political challenges in the more conservative national environment of the late 1970s and 1980s.

The last part of the chapter looks at the prolonged struggle to oust the U.S. Navy from Vieques. Nearly two decades after the demise of the organizations that initiated the Vieques Support Network, the campaign was revived by some of the original participants from EC-MINP, the PSP, and the Young Lords. The perspective embraced by core activists in this successful movement paralleled that of El Comité in its early years in the struggles for housing and education rights, as recalled by Federico Lora:

"We always kept that link with the community. Most of the people who supported us didn't support independence. But they liked us because we were part of the struggles in the community. We were able to deal with the issues that affected the community, without bringing in [the independence of] Puerto Rico" (Federico Lora, 6/18/04; also quoted in Chapter 2)

²⁶⁴ While Max Elbaum (2002) refers collectively to the Left organizations of 1970s as the "New Communist Movement," here I follow Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left* (2006), in using "third world left" to indicate specifically those Left organizations with specific ethnic/racial identities.

Learning from their previous experience, Left activists explicitly rejected developing a campaign for Vieques rooted in an anti-colonial frame, constructing instead a more inclusive campaign which various sectors, including those who knew nothing of Puerto Rico's history with the U.S. or who were *not* pro-independence, could join.

Multiple Endeavors; Minimal Reflection

In 1970, El Comité operated on the premise that protest movements grow from the bottom up. Carmen Martell, a member from 1970 through 1984 who served in the Central Committee and Political Commission and as Secretary of Organization, recalled the early years:

“At the beginning, we were involved in discussions about how you integrate and what you [learn] from the masses...” (Carmen Martell, 9/25/04)

But once the organization identified itself as part of the “Marxist-Leninist” Left, it gradually became immersed in the dynamic within the Left wherein groups sought “correct” positions on countless theoretical and ideological questions that were essentially isolated from the practical concerns and struggles of ordinary people. The members of leading bodies traveled more frequently to attend party-building forums; many members participated in solidarity committees and in debates on nuances of the positions of Left organizations in the United States, in Puerto Rico, and in other countries. One former member who represented MINP in a local struggle for health care recalled discussing his work periodically in his chapter but feeling frustrated about not having adequate input from the organization:

“[I] would often express my frustration to [my point person in the organization] that El Comité [referring to EC-MINP] was too consumed with the struggle for independence of Puerto Rico at the expense of the community struggle.” (Confidential Interview)

He was not alone in his frustration. Whereas the organization openly and as a group had participated in the early housing and education struggles, its members were now dispersed in multiple endeavors. There was little organization-wide discussion of the needs and conditions in the various neighborhoods, of tactical questions of how to escalate and link localized protests, or of whether to change tactics (Jaime Suárez, 8/ /04). The situation mirrored precisely one of the flaws MINP had perceptively observed in other organizations of the Left in its prior critique of the party-building trend:

“The more Marxist and rhetorical we got, the more we complicated the task. We neglected to look at our experiences in the Bronx, Long Island, the Lower East Side, and to say ‘let’s see how the organization can learn from our role there.’” (Victor Quintana, 9/25/04)

In retrospect, Quintana thought the organization did not pay enough attention to what was happening in the Puerto Rican community, or what MINP represented within that community and how it could be of use:

“We were being helpful at the margins but not in a strategic sense. We tried to respond to the exploitation and oppression, whether in the South Bronx or Lower East Side, but we did not discuss how we could play an effective role in helping those communities gain political consciousness or build non-traditional leadership. Those were challenges that, at best, we were trying to grapple with, but not enough as a group. Our political studies were disconnected from that conversation.”²⁶⁵ (Victor Quintana, 9/25/04)

²⁶⁵ Though there was no single “syllabus” for political study used throughout the organization’s history, the early members recalled reading Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*; *Labor’s Untold Story*; and sections of Marx’s *Capital Vol. I*. Lenin’s *What is to be Done* was a staple of study groups as were segments from Mao Tse-Tung’s writings on liberalism and contradiction. The pamphlets produced by revolutionary organizations from Latin America, such as Chile’s *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionario*, Uruguay’s *Movimiento de Liberación Nacional-Tupamaros*, and Argentina’s *Partido Revolucionario de Trabajadores Revolucionario de Trabajadores*, were also shared with new recruits. For one year in the late 1970s, political studies in MINP entailed readings from *Fundamental Principles of Marxist-Leninist Philosophy*, translated from Russian to English by Robert Daglish (Russian author printed in Russian on text) (USSR: Progress Publishers, 1974). Members read sections of Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* on intellectuals and Che Guevara’s “*Notes on Man and Socialism*.” Cadres were also expected to read J. Peters, *The Communist Party: A Manual on Organization*; compilations of essays by Lenin entitled, *Party Work in the Masses* and *Critical Remarks on the National Question*; Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*; V. Adoratsky, *Dialectical Materialism* (San Francisco: Proletarian Publishers, 1934); and Georges Politzer, *Elementary*

The scattering of cadres among a plethora of political action groups did not help. Central Committee member Jaime Suárez, while serving as Secretary of Organization in 1980, learned that many members of New York City chapters were no longer involved in local issues but instead participated in solidarity networks comprised primarily of the Left or performed mainly internal functions (Jaime Suárez, 3/18/06). Others who were involved in local political action, he recalled, admitted they had no strategic view of what to do:

“[We entered] an organization without the benefit of veteran fighters saying, ‘this is how to do it.’ We knew we had to integrate into community organizations, and we did. We would make our publications available to the people we got to know. But getting them to see the issue beyond the local community or to push the struggle beyond the immediate issue to a larger critique of capitalism was much more difficult and, for all intents and purposes, was not done.” (Jaime Suárez, 3/18/06)

In another light, the propaganda of the organization in the late 1970s reflected the growth and development of MINP’s intellectual and analytical skills. *Obreros en Marcha* had progressed into a more sophisticated political newspaper through the years, widely distributed within the Left and its periphery; and MINP devoted many resources to producing it consistently. Yet, the newspaper continued to be distributed door-to-door in the projects and neighborhoods of the Lower East Side, Upper Manhattan, and the Bronx, and in the suburban areas of Brentwood, Long Island, even though, as former members reflected, it was probably inappropriate for mass consumption and unappealing to most residents. Chapters tried to print their own bulletins focused on neighborhood issues but, with inadequate resources, this occurred inconsistently.

Principles of Philosophy (New York: International Publishers, 1976). The editorial of *Obreros en Marcha*, often written by the Political Commission, was the subject of discussion once a month.

Given the structural change in climate, it is doubtful that the organization would have survived as it was had it simply reflected more or made better choices about the content of propaganda or members' time. Like similar radical organizations of the period, EC-MINP was not organizationally or ideologically prepared in the early 1980s to attempt to coordinate with other groups (such as the Puerto Rican Socialist Party) the type of large-scale local response in New York City that might have offered, at the very least, greater vocal opposition to budget service cuts and retrenchment policies. Many individual activists tried to do just that by rallying residents, co-workers, and students to fight cuts in day care, health, and education. By this point, however, with the leadership immersed in ideologically-driven party-building debates, with members scattered among numerous neighborhood-based endeavors and international solidarity campaigns, EC-MINP became increasingly ineffective locally.

Adding to the analysis that the cadre organizations of the 1970s had run their course by the end of the decade, MINP's experience is comparable to the account offered by José 'Che' Velázquez about the disintegration of the U.S. branch of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP) (Velázquez 1998). One dissimilar factor was that the U.S. Branch of PSP was accountable to the PSP leadership in Puerto Rico, which focused primarily on the independence struggle. Still, Velázquez makes two observations relevant to EC-MINP. First, he attributes PSP's rapid decline in the late 1970s to "its failure to develop a clear and consistent political theory and practice for organizing the Puerto Rican community in the United States" (1998, 48) just as MINP's concern with party-building and multiple endeavors distanced it from community issues.

The second parallel concerns the “intensive involvement of the U.S. branch” of PSP in the ideological debates over differences among the leadership in Puerto Rico (Velázquez 1998, 49). For MINP, theoretical and ideological debates were not centered solely on the independence struggle in Puerto Rico. However, it is symptomatic of ideological intransigence to elevate the principle of ideological unity above practical political work. Democratic centralism restricts the space for individuals or units within the organization to pursue paths that do not reflect the official position of the organization. Therefore, when differences emerge over whether a political practice accurately reflects the political line, participants become immobilized or immersed in internal conflict. MINP’s split illustrates the dynamic.

Democratic Centralism and the Split in El Comité-MINP

In January 1981, an abrupt and unanticipated rupture occurred in the form of a debilitating split between the full members. Following the exit (ousting, by most accounts) of two known leaders from the Central Committee and members of several chapters, the remaining cadres floundered. The core group who believed MINP could survive the break continued to meet sporadically; however, the attempts to revive the organization failed. Only two issues of *Obreros en Marcha* were published after January 1981, one in April and the other in August 1982. By 1984, most individuals had moved on to other endeavors, and the rest abandoned the effort.

The immediate episode leading to the split concerned a difference over the procedure for presenting grievances under democratic centralism. Former members I interviewed had different perspectives on specific events, and the accounts were vague and sometimes contradictory. It was clearly an uncomfortable topic, in light of the

hostility of the event as well as the fact that many former members from both sides of the split are friends as well as contemporary political allies in various endeavors. Apparently, a member of the Central Committee and a member of the base had raised “charges” (undisclosed to me) against several other members, which the Central Committee did not treat seriously or substantively. Soon after, a petition signed by a leading member of the Central Committee and a group of approximately a dozen cadres was presented to the Central Committee demanding a full membership meeting to discuss these charges and to “evaluate the leadership” (*Statement on the Division in MINP-El Comité*, 3). According to the Statement released by MINP following the split, the petition “alluded to political differences [but] did not state what the cadres considered these to be.” In deliberating its response, the Central Committee decided to expel all signers of the petition, based on the violations of the structure of the organization, unless they repudiated the procedure used to request the membership meeting:

“The cadres who signed the memo came from various structures in the organization. Therefore, the memo represented a serious violation of the principles of democratic centralism which have guided our organization since its Formative Assembly in 1975...[constituting a] faction...which weakens the unity of will and action of any Marxist-Leninist organization....[M]ore fundamentally, the memo represented a violation of...revolutionary morality because the charges it raised...were based on serious distortions...[implying] that the Central Committee was deliberately...suppressing ideological struggle....[T]he Central Committee members who signed the ultimatum ignored their own agreement on the decisions and actions...which they now said created...negative situations.... We felt [this faction’s intent] was to attack and destroy, not...to advance...a principled struggle....” (*Statement*, 3)

From the other side, a former member of the Central Committee recalled the precipitous events slightly differently. Acknowledging that the memo represented a “technical” violation of the structure, this individual insisted that the drastic action was

taken after numerous frustrated attempts to persuade the leadership to address the conflicts at hand and was based also on the belief that the majority in the leading body could not resolve the issues objectively (Confidential Interview). In this account, no signer of the memo entertained the possibility that a collective purge would occur. In the subsequent period, a full membership meeting (minus expelled members) revealed to the leading body that it had not addressed existing tensions and dissatisfaction among members with the direction of the organization. Members complained that the existing structure was too bureaucratic for members to openly share and compare grievances and for issues to receive prompt and serious attention in leading bodies. Quintana recalled Irving Kaplan's criticism years earlier that MINP's organizational structure "related to the conditions in Russia in 1905 and not New York City in 1975." (Victor Quintana, 9/25/04) The Central Committee conceded it had acted "precipitously and incorrectly" by expelling members without identifying and addressing the underlying issues (*Statement*, 4).

Based on the information gleaned from conflicting accounts, it seems that around the time of the split, MINP's leadership was engaged in heated debates over what types of political activities were "reformist" (with a pejorative connotation) versus "revolutionary." Several members thought others were too entrenched in local politics, behaving like "opportunists" and "reformists," and diluting the revolutionary program of MINP. Some also believed that greater effort should be given to the "party-building" dialogue within the Left (Confidential Interview).

Whatever the meaning of the jargon in the specific contexts, these debates reflected the level of abstraction and the shift from bottom-up to top-down strategic

perspectives that had affected similar organizations. Pulido (2006) describes the nearly identical experience of CASA, a Chicano Marxist-organization in Los Angeles, whose internal tensions stemmed from differences on revolutionary rhetoric and political practices. The undemocratic practices fostered by an elaborate structure and sectarianism, as well as police surveillance, inhibited CASA from resolving internal conflicts; it dissolved in 1978 (119-120). Similarly, the Asian American group East Wind, also a cadre organization involved in community activism and party-building, faced internal conflict arising from the shift in emphasis from community action to more time spent on “study, theory, and political development” (Pulido 2006, 111). One of the major conflicts in the Black Panther Party occurred around the question of how involved its chapters in California should be in electoral politics. According to Pulido, the extensive hierarchy of democratic centralism made it unable to resolve this and other conflicts productively. In all of the organizations that functioned in the early to late 1970s, including the PSP, EC-MINP, CASA, East Wind, and the organizations Elbaum (2002) describes in his study of the “new communist movement,” the concern with theoretical development and party-building at the expense of practical reflection on grassroots mobilization distanced them from the population they sought to reach.

Tensions Arising From Diversity

The immersion within the Left and the tendency to become entrenched in theoretical and ideological debates prior to the split had obvious implications for the pool of potential recruits, which was reflected in the changing composition of MINP in its later years. A small number of individuals were recruited from solidarity and party-building networks, whose socioeconomic backgrounds differed from the majority of

MINP's members. These were mainly White intellectuals, described by some as "theoretically sophisticated," very supportive of the pro-independence cause in Puerto Rico, and enthusiastic about party-building. Their path to becoming full members of MINP apparently was atypically swift – several months, according to several accounts – because of their "level of political development," experience within the Left, and other skills they brought to the organization. More commonly, a new recruit moved from sympathizer to affiliate to full member in one to two years; some remained sympathizers without ever joining the ranks of MINP as full members.

I raise the socioeconomic composition of the later-day recruits for several reasons. First, all of the newer recruits signed the petition calling for a full membership meeting; but the Central Committee signer and others were members since the early 1970s and came from different chapters. The composition of the group was diverse in this sense. Those who did not join the petition were also somewhat diverse. Therefore, there was not a clear demarcation on the political and procedural questions along lines directly traceable to class, race, or ethnicity.

Second, from a different view, it is significant that all of the newer recruits received their theoretical orientation outside of MINP and impressed recruiters sufficiently for their membership to be fast-tracked (Confidential Interviews). The new members added to the enthusiasm about party-building and worried about what they viewed as ideological and programmatic reformism in the political activism of certain cadres involved in community struggles. Third, it should be noted that, in an interview separate from this project, a former member of the Bronx chapter commented that

“Generally, the White members had a completely different outlook from us. When we talked about Puerto Rico, Chile, Nicaragua, etc., it came

from an understanding of their realities because of the cultural similarities. If a woman could not come to a meeting because of problems with her husband, we all understood. We said, 'That's her husband, we've got to work with him,' whereas White members said, 'You know, he's this, he's that...' [I]f I had to do it all over again, I would not allow any White members in the organization." (Liz Figueroa, quoted in Velázquez 1998, 99)²⁶⁶

In my interview, Figueroa clarified that she believed there were exceptions to her view that racial/ethnic diversification in MINP was premature (3/18/06). The Young Lords and the Black Panthers each had several members who were not Puerto Rican or African American. Others I interviewed did not believe that ethnic or class differences were factors in EC-MINP's split. However, Figueroa's position that ethnic identity was an essential component of EC-MINP's political identity reflects the logic of El Comité's initial formation in 1970, as a specific form of resistance to *ethnic, racial, and class* subordination in the United States. It is important to acknowledge, at the very least as an ongoing dilemma of social movements in the United States, the multiple difficulties encountered in trying to build diverse, multi-ethnic, mass movements in the context of an extremely segregated society, where oppression takes particular forms in people's daily lives which are neither fully understood by the larger society nor treated in national discourse as significant problems. The rare opportunities for cross-cultural exchange do not often occur in the form of reciprocal immersion in each group's normal environment.

Though there have been too few studies (other than of the Black Panther Party), Pulido's (2006) comparative study of three organizations of the Third-World Left in Los

²⁶⁶ In pointing to different approaches of White and Latino members to personal relationship, Figueroa alludes to the cultural and political differences members of the Latin Women's Collective identified with White feminists at a socialist-feminist conference in 1975 (discussed in Chapter 4). The implication here is that the White members were less tolerant of male attitudes they viewed as sexist, whereas Latino members understood that rigid denunciation of deeply embedded attitudes would be counterproductive if it caused individuals to alienate themselves from the organization.

Angeles in the 1970s demonstrates links between the differential racial oppression experienced by sectors of national minorities and the ethnic/racial-specific politics of resistance that developed within each sector. The political organizations she discusses were all anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist, but the political action programs of each responded to the conditions faced by each ethnic/racial group. The Black Panther Party focused on self-defense against police brutality in African American neighborhoods; CASA fought for Mexican immigrant workers' rights; and East Wind struggled against racial stereotypes, gang membership, and drug use in Asian communities. While all three groups believed that multi-ethnic class unity was necessary for radical social change, they prioritized their struggles against local forms of oppression based on race and national identity. In EC-MINP as well, the priority some activists placed on local issues conflicted with the priority of other members who sought the class solidarity that theory and ideology prescribed but which structural and institutional constraints discouraged.

Red-Baiting, Government Infiltration, and the Grand Jury

By the late 1970s/early 1980s, anti-communist ideology peaked once again as the United States vigorously renewed its Cold War policies and rhetoric, especially in relation to Central America (Jonas 1982; 1991). It was one thing to carry a radical banner at a rally of thousands in Washington, D.C. against the economic blockade of Cuba or apartheid in South Africa. It was quite another to participate in a local day care association as a representative of a Left organization and risk being red-baited. In their communities, schools, and workplaces, members of MINP revealed their affiliation selectively, to individuals who were deemed trustworthy and receptive. The ideological

marginalization of the Left in the national political discourse is a persistent quandary of socialists, communists, and radicals in general in the United States.

Another important context for understanding democratic centralism is activists' concern about government infiltration and harassment. The strict structure that limited extensive internal communication was designed to protect the membership against random intrusions and harassment by government authorities. Although the repression in the U.S. did not approximate the daily threat of abduction, torture, and death faced by activists in authoritarian Latin American regimes,²⁶⁷ radicals in the U.S. risked jobs and reputations in communities, schools, and workplaces for the ideals they espoused. The evidence of government infiltration and harassment of the Communist Party of the United States, the Black Panther Party, and the Puerto Rican independence groups is indisputable (Cunningham 2004; McAdam 1999). In an undated informational document, the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) reported incidents involving FBI harassment of individuals who traveled to Nicaragua after the Sandinista victory to exchange ideas with economic development organizations. The FBI questioned co-workers about the travelers' activities, implying they might be involved in illegal activities. Also according to CCR:

“The FBI’s massive investigation of [CISPES] was carried out under [Executive Order] 12333...as a window to spy on other Central American groups including the Network in Solidarity with Guatemala, the Nicaraguan Network, the Thomas Merton Center, and the Central America Mobilization Network. While the FBI produced not a shred of evidence of wrongdoing on the part of CISPES during its five-year investigation, it managed to amass 17 volumes of files on CISPES....

[H]eavily deleted portions of these files...show that the FBI...regularly

²⁶⁷ See, for example, J. Patrice McSherry, *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007).

attended and photographed demonstrations and meetings, recorded license plate numbers of participants, in addition to conducting surreptitious interviews and placing informants.... Agents...invaded college campuses and visited employers and family members explaining that they were investigating terrorist threats.” CCR, “COINTELPRO,” undated)

One specific device used to intimidate Puerto Rican activists (and non-activists) was the Grand Jury. On several occasions in the mid- to late-1970s, several armed clandestine organizations claimed responsibility for violent acts, including random bombings in New York and Chicago and an attack on a group of U.S. Navy personnel in the town of Sábana Seca, Puerto Rico. EC-MINP, through *Obreros en Marcha*, criticized these “acts of terrorism which neither deal with nor meet the needs of present conditions [and which] tend to isolate the revolutionary forces further...from the masses.”²⁶⁸ The organization wrote, also, that the violent actions led those groups “to an uneven confrontation with the state, providing the state with an excuse to continue harassing the revolutionary movement.”²⁶⁹ The harassment took the form of a series of Grand Jury investigations, in which affiliates of all of the pro-independence organizations as well as never-affiliated individuals were subpoenaed or threatened with subpoenas to appear before the Grand Jury. MINP reported in *OEM* that suspected FBI agents followed members, and ransacked several homes. According to MINP’s account, the Columbus Avenue office was placed under surveillance, FBI agents sought information about members’ personal lives from neighbors, building superintendents, and employers, all of which EC-MINP described as “a campaign of character assassination...intended to create an atmosphere of fear among our fellow workers and the community [to discourage] any

²⁶⁸ “Editorial: The Struggle Against Repression,” *OEM*, vol. 2, no. 9 (September 1977): 2.

²⁶⁹ *ibid*, 2.

type of activity which is critical of government policies.”²⁷⁰ The publicly-staged government campaigns created the illusion that all those with pro-independence sentiments supported random acts of violence and “terrorism” or at least implied that engaging in any form of protest was illegal and cause for investigation.²⁷¹

The position taken by pro-independence organizations in the 1970s not to cooperate with grand juries was based on the view that most individuals were subpoenaed not because they were suspected of having information relevant to the stated purpose for the investigation but because the F.B.I. was engaged in harassing the independence movement. When a person testifies before a grand jury, no legal representation is permitted in the room, and there are few parameters to the range of investigators’ questions. In 1978, the Puerto Rico Solidarity Committee formed the Community Grand Jury Campaign to mobilize activists and legal counsel against Grand Jury repression.

The Grand Jury continues to be used by the FBI to solicit information about the independence movement through subpoenas of Puerto Ricans who are not necessarily known to be affiliated with any political organization or movement. In late 2007, the Justice Department issued subpoenas to several individuals in New York to testify in Federal Court, Eastern District, in Brooklyn, before a Grand Jury convened by the FBI/NYPD Anti-Terrorism Task Force.²⁷² The question of whether or not to testify poses

²⁷⁰ “Editorial: El Comité-MINP and Grand Jury Repression,” *OEM*, vol. 2, no. 5 (May 1977): 2; “Repression and the Grand Jury,” *OEM*, vol. 1, no. 15 (March 1976); “Editorial: The Struggle Against Repression,” *OEM*, vol. 2, no. 9 (September 1977); and “Grand Jury Attacks Independentistas,” *OEM*, vol. 5, no. 9 (November/December 1980). There is no way to independently verify accounts of government harassment contained in these articles, and I did not ask interviewees to share individual FBI files they might have recovered under FOIA. As discussed in Chapter 3, CUNY’s Center for Puerto Rican Studies is in the process of sorting through thousands of FBI files on Puerto Rican activists received on the demand of Congressman José Serrano.

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²⁷² Jesús Dávila, “Puerto Rico: Denuncian que se Producirán Arrestos de Independentistas,” *El Diario La Prensa*, December 27, 2007.

a serious dilemma for those individuals. The precedent of non-cooperation by activists of cadre organizations suggests that some independence groups today may expect these individuals to follow suit, despite their lack of organizational affiliation, the difficulty of paying for hefty legal costs for private attorneys, and the unlikelihood that a campaign to quash the subpoenas would draw broad support in the post-9/11 political environment. Jail sentences damage careers and reputations; and it is debatable whether the personal sacrifice serves a greater purpose of increasing mass support for the cause of Puerto Rico's independence, assuming individuals were thus inclined.

Rejection of Electoral Politics

Until the 1981 split, EC-MINP maintained a policy of non-participation in electoral politics, meaning its members did not run for political office or endorse candidates running for office. Its opposition was rooted in the lesson EC drew from the housing movement of 1970 that local politicians, often supported in their electoral bids by working-class constituents, abandoned (or never represented) the needs and concerns of those constituents once they were elected to office and became accountable to the city's public and private sector elites.

“We came out of an experience, in the late 60s and early 70s, where, for the most part, political machineries were corrupt; our own community distrusted politicians. We did not want to associate in any way, shape or form, with the political parties or the formal political process because we were imbued with that sense of being pure; we wanted to be honest.” (Jaime Suárez, 9/25/04)

EC-MINP also viewed the electoral process as a deceptive institution that legitimized the democratic façade through which elites perpetuated anti-worker and racist policies and that reinforced the misconception that well-intentioned individuals could effect structural change if elected to office. The position included local, state, and

national elections. As their anti-capitalist politics matured, the organization constructed a world view that saw the main political parties as two sides of the same coin in their embrace of capitalism and imperialism. Demanding specific reforms of elites was a necessary part of building a broader political movement; but expecting the state to function independently, as a neutral arbiter of conflicting and irreconcilable differences, was contrary to Marxist doctrine.²⁷³

Obreros en Marcha periodically criticized the two-party lock on the winner-take-all electoral system as precluding the possibility of an electoral path to socialist representation. The C.I.A.-assisted coup that overthrew Chilean President Allende in 1973 confirmed the belief that the repressive arm of the state would take extreme measures against even those who adhered to electoral procedures of liberal democracies but then tried to use political institutions to espouse working class ideals (Kornbluh 2003).

But by 1980, especially at the local level where protests sought redress to the perceived racist and class-biased policies of the Koch Administration, political activists began to view electoral challenges as a potential path for asserting greater influence in government. In its 1981 *Statement on the Division in El Comité-MINP*, the organization wrote that the issue of electoral participation was one of the key questions that needed to be considered in the ensuing period. Though the organization did not last long enough to address the question as a group, many individuals came to embrace the view that electoral participation was an important forum for pressing a progressive agenda for

²⁷³ Though it is unlikely that MINP, as a whole, read the scholarly debates on the relative autonomy of the state (Miliband; Poulantzas; Block; Skocpol, et al.), the general view that the state was the executive committee for managing the affairs of the bourgeoisie was firmly embedded, as the Communist Manifesto was widely read.

several reasons. First, the revolutionary party-building movement (or any party-building movement of a social democratic or socialist nature) in the United States in 1980 was not practical. Second, conservatives were using electoral and legislative processes quite successfully to promote regressive candidates and policies that attacked even the minor gains made during the prior two decades in labor rights, affirmative action, housing, and social programs, and, internationally, especially in relation to Central America. Following twelve years of Republican control of the White House and the rise of the Reagan Democrats in Congress, more liberal and even moderate Democratic Party candidates for national office became more attractive to Left activists; the concept of “the lesser of two evils” took on greater significance.

Third, participants in various campaigns were facing the question of electoral politics at the local level. For example, the Coalition in Defense of Puerto Rican and Hispanic Rights debated whether to participate in school board elections and other campaigns and whether to endorse policies of local legislatures and council members. Finally, when MINP split and declined, many turned their attention to families and careers – or at least paid greater attention to their prospects for steady employment, which had been a secondary concern while in MINP. Through networks established over the years, former members knew individuals working in government institutions and agencies and in non-profit organizations. Several joined Manhattan City Council Member Ruth Messinger’s staff while others worked for Manhattan Borough President David Dinkins in the mid- to late-1980s. McAdam (1988, 1999) points to a similar trajectory among civil rights activists, as does Pulido (2006) in her study of former members of Third-World Left groups.

When Dinkins ran for Mayor in 1989, former MINP activists joined a coalition with African Americans as “Latinos for Dinkins.” It was another opportunity, they thought, to work toward greater unity between African Americans and Latinos, which had long been a goal of El Comité, and to influence government policy in New York City. Several former members held prominent positions in Dinkins’ Administration from 1990 to 1993, including Victor Quintana who was Director of the Office of Constituent Services. In Brentwood, Long Island, Jaime Suárez was elected to the Brentwood School Board in 1990. In retrospect, Suárez suggests that an alternative approach to electoral politics earlier in the life of the organization may have raised its profile and could have positioned individuals in positions of leadership in established institutions such as local councils or community boards (Jaime Suárez, 3/18/06).

Learning from the Past: *¡Fuera la Marina de Vieques, Puerto Rico!*

One of the most notable achievements of Puerto Rican activists, in a broad-based coalition, was the sustained support they gave to the fishermen and residents of Vieques, Puerto Rico, resulting in the ousting of the U.S. Navy from the island in 2003. MINP was an integral part of the movement in New York City along with PSP when it began in 1979, and former members of both organizations continued their activism in the revitalized Vieques campaign long after the disintegration of these organizations.

On May 17 (Armed Forces Day), 1980, 2,500 demonstrators from the Vieques Support Network marched along empty streets in Washington, D.C., demanding the U.S. Navy leave Vieques.²⁷⁴ Despite their isolation, they shouted, “ni con bombas, ni con balas, esta lucha no se para.” (Neither with bombs nor bullets will this struggle be

²⁷⁴ Estimate is taken from *OEM*, vol. 5, no. 4, June 1980, 11-12. Another estimate, provided by former members of the Vieques Support Network was 4,000.

stopped.) The march in support of the people of Vieques, an island municipality of Puerto Rico, to oust the U.S. Navy from their island coincided with the arrest of two local fishermen from the Crusade to Save Vieques.²⁷⁵ More than twenty years later, on May 1, 2003, the United States ended the 60-year naval occupation.²⁷⁶

In 1941 the U.S. Navy expropriated three-quarters of Vieques' 33,000 acres, pushing the entire population onto the remaining 6,000 acres bordered by barbed wire. Residents who had depended on sugar cane cultivation on the now-occupied 26,000 acres were instantly displaced. Thousands of fishermen lost their main livelihood as the surrounding waters became restricted and transformed into weapons-testing sites, instigating a half-century of structural unemployment and toxic contamination of human and aquatic life.²⁷⁷ Vieques' crystal southern coast became the site of simulated atomic attacks and, in 1949, of amphibious assault exercises by 100 ships of the Atlantic Fleet.²⁷⁸ The Navy conducted target practice with live ammunition, engaged in war games, and practiced launching military attacks from the shores and waters of Vieques.²⁷⁹ For decades the U.S. Navy would not confirm that it used the island to store nuclear warheads and ammunition in hollowed-out mountains. In 1999, however, prodded by inquiries into unusually high cancer rates, the U.S. government made the startling admission that

²⁷⁵ *OEM*, vol. 5, no. 4, June 1980, 11-12.

²⁷⁶ Dana Canedy, "Navy Leaves a Battered Island, and Puerto Ricans Cheer," *New York Times*, May 2, 2003.

²⁷⁷ Through the sixty-year occupation, unemployment reached 50 percent; environmental contaminants included arsenic, cyanide, lead, mercury, and uranium. (McCaffrey 2002, 79)

²⁷⁸ The convergence of more than 100 ships of the Atlantic Fleet for a two-day amphibious "assault" against the southern coast of Vieques shocked local residents who, at that point, were powerless to object. Hanson W. Baldwin, "100 Ships In Games 'Hit' Island Today: Two-Day Amphibious 'Attack' on Vieques, Near Puerto Rico, To Involve 9,000 Troops," *New York Times*, March 1, 1949.

²⁷⁹ Mock invasions of Central American and Caribbean countries were often practiced in Vieques. Military installations assisted and directed actual military operations, including the amphibious landing of U.S. troops in the Dominican Republic in 1965. See Carmen Aponte, "U.S. Navy Versus Vieques: Puerto Rican Social Justice through Civil Disobedience," *Journal of Poverty*, vol. 8 issue 4 (December 22, 2004): 59-73; Katherine T. McCaffrey, "Social Struggle Against the U.S. Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico," *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 33, no. 1, 83-101 (2006); Carlos Suárez-Boulangger, "¡Ni una bomba mas! U.S. Navy Out of Vieques! www.zmag.org/zmag/articles/boulanggerjune2000.htm.

radioactive depleted uranium shells were tested on the island; Marine warplanes had conducted the exercises by firing several hundred rounds of shells at a Vieques range²⁸⁰ (Davis, Hayes-Conroy and Jones 2007; McCaffrey 2002, 181).

Following the 1949 display of the Atlantic Fleet, the Viequenses began to respond to the danger and threat they felt from the naval presence, pursuing legal means to press their grievances. They wrote letters appealing to the Navy to reduce its activities, documented damages caused by naval boats and, in 1978, sought a Temporary Restraining Order in federal court to stop the bombing practices. Persuaded by the Navy's claim that military training exercises in Vieques were vital to national defense, Judge Toruella denied the request. According to one fisherman, "the court has decided that while the Navy becomes richer, the fishermen should die of hunger."²⁸¹ Puerto Rico's local government filed a lawsuit seeking environmental impact statements from the Navy, but the local government had no jurisdiction over federal defense policy. Legal maneuvers on both sides ensued for years. Suffering from unemployment of nearly one-third its population, thousands of Viequenses left their homes in this period for neighboring islands of St. Croix and St. Thomas (of the U.S. Virgin Islands).²⁸²

Meanwhile, frustrated by years of negative response from the U.S. government, the fishermen turned to alternative tactics. On February 6, 1978, a flotilla of forty fishing boats with signs saying, "Vieques nos pertenece; rescatémosla" (Vieques belongs to us;

²⁸⁰ For essays by physicians, scholars, former public officials, and activists explaining the steel-penetrating, destruction capacities and health and environmental impact of uranium depleted shells, see *Metal of Dishonor: Depleted Uranium, How the Pentagon Radiates Soldiers and Civilians with DU Weapons*. 2d. ed., International Action Center (New York, 1999); also, Katsuma Yagasaki, "Depleted Uranium Shells, the Radioactive Weapons: Perpetuation of War Damage By Radiation," Paper prepared for the World Uranium Weapons Conference, August 2003, <http://www.ratical.org/radiation/DU/KyagasakiOnDU.pdf>.

²⁸¹ Quoted in "Vieques: An Island in Struggle," *OEM*, vol. 3, no. 12 (February 1979): 6.

²⁸² The population of Vieques was nearly 20,000 at the time of the naval occupation and was quickly reduced to less than half within the first few years. One of the Navy's initial "programs" on the island was to help relocate residents to nearby St. Croix, where many remain today.

let's recover it), entered restricted waters where warships from the U.S. and allies were about to begin naval and aerial exercises. Stunned naval commanders were forced to cancel the scheduled activities.²⁸³ The civil disobedience, organized by the Fisherman's Association of Vieques and Crusade to Save Vieques, was the first of many "fish-ins" in which fishermen risked their lives to call the world's attention to the Navy's use of their waters and land for missile practice and as a weapons' storage facility, to the bombing that daily threatened residents' lives, and to the dangers posed to the health and well being of residents by high noise levels. The protests spread across the mainland of Puerto Rico. The main political parties, including the pro-U.S. statehood party (PNP), expressed support for the fishermen.

In 1979, forty activists were arrested while attending a religious ceremony on the island. The same year, Angel Rodríguez Cristóbal was found hanging dead in his Florida prison cell.²⁸⁴ These events and a visit to New York City by one of the fishermen prompted the formation of the Vieques Support Network in the U.S. The largest committees developed in New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. According to former co-coordinator of the New York Committee and member of El Comité-MINP, Sandra Trujillo, the Support Network was formed with

"the intent of fomenting and coordinating action in the United States in support of the Vieques struggle; of bringing about the withdrawal of the U.S. Navy and termination of military activity in Vieques; and of receiving restitution for the people of Vieques for all damages and losses resulting from military presence on the island."²⁸⁵

²⁸³ "Vieques: An Island in Struggle," *OEM*, vol. 3, no. 12 (February 1979): 6-7.

²⁸⁴ "Bishop and Ministers Are Arrested by Navy in Puerto Rico;" "Puerto Ricans Vow to Avenge Death in U.S. Prison," *New York Times*, May 20, 1979 and November 18, 1979, respectively.

²⁸⁵ Quoted in McCaffrey 1998, 330-331.

While most of the initial committee members came from the Puerto Rican left, over the next few years, with MINP and PSP members as coordinators in New York, the Network gained support from individuals in Puerto Rican communities and from diverse sectors in the United States who were not necessarily advocates of Puerto Rico's independence. For about five years, the group grew and gained momentum by participating in local cultural activities in the South Bronx and East Harlem, festivals in Central Park, and the Puerto Rican Day Parade. It passed out information, collected signatures for petitions, and spoke to students and community groups. Participants visited churches, environmentalists, human rights activists, elected officials, and labor unions. Committees in other cities carried out similar activities. Washington, D.C. members lobbied Congress and testified at Congressional hearings. The Network found that many individuals and organizations previously unfamiliar with the history of U.S. military activity in the region and with the relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico were moved to sympathize with the cause of Vieques residents.

Despite political tensions between groups on the Left that at times kept them from working closer together in other areas, for the most part activists transcended their differences to cooperate on this issue. Consistent with the lessons learned by MINP about the debilitating effects of ideological intransigence, rather than integrating the more controversial and broader question of Puerto Rico's colonial status, the Support Network focused on the violations of economic, civil, and human rights in Vieques. Consensus on this approach was not easy to achieve in the mix of socialists and nationalists, some of whom believed that a demand for independence for Puerto Rico should be linked to the demand for an end to U.S. militarism in Vieques. But, respecting the example of the

Vieques residents, whose political affiliations varied, activists found the movement was most effective when it confined its critique to the immediate consequences of U.S. military activities for residents of Vieques. Zoilo Torres, formerly of PSP and co-coordinator of the New York Committee, emphasized the lessons drawn from the Vieques solidarity movement: “We infused the Puerto Rican movement with a spirit [of] coalition-building. We were able to do this by addressing the immediate needs of the fishermen and by focusing on winnable goals.”²⁸⁶

When the movement in Vieques ebbed in the mid-1980s, so did the solidarity work in the United States. In 1983, Puerto Rico’s Governor Romero Barceló signed a “Memorandum of Understanding” with the U.S. Navy that promised financial and technical assistance from the Departments of Defense and the Navy for economic development in Vieques. The agreement satisfied some of the residents and quieted the protests, and the Support Network in the U.S. dissipated. However, little federal support materialized; military activities did not cease; and the negative economic, health and environmental impact worsened.²⁸⁷ Over the course of fifteen years, sporadic confrontations between U.S. military forces and protesters sometimes ended in violent deaths (on both sides) and imprisonments. Then, on April 29, 1999, a civilian guard, David Sanes-Rodríguez, was killed in Vieques when two stray 500-pound bombs exploded during Navy target practice. Several other civilians were wounded. The reactions in Puerto Rico and the United States were swift. Strikes at the University of Puerto Rico and protests all over Puerto Rico drew thousands, with representatives from

²⁸⁶ Quoted in McCaffrey (1998, 338).

²⁸⁷ One of the most common injuries sustained by children and adult residents of Vieques during the sixty-year naval occupation was partial or complete hearing loss.

all of the political parties and many elected officials. For 387 days two hundred protesters occupied naval land until a pre-dawn raid removed them in May 2000.²⁸⁸

Though El Comité-MINP, PSP, PRRWO, and the original Vieques Support Network no longer existed as such in 1999, many former activists reunited to plan a response in the U.S. to the incident. They convened a meeting in New York City at Local 1199's union hall and, in the months that followed, reinvigorated their efforts to bring national and international attention to Vieques. For the next three years, acts of public protest and civil disobedience spread throughout Puerto Rico and the United States. On December 7, 1999, eleven activists calling themselves, "La Brigada David Sanes-Rodríguez," walked from the New York Public Library to the United Nations. Before the police could intervene, the group chained themselves to the gate in front of the employee entrance of the U.N. building on First Avenue and East 42nd Street. By pre-arrangement, two New York journalists and former Young Lords, Juan González and Pablo Guzmán, and a third photographer, José Rosario, recorded the events. Ruben Blades, the Panamanian-born singer, actor, and former presidential candidate, read a statement to the press.²⁸⁹ As expected, the group was arrested.

Once again, the Vieques Network sought participation from diverse sectors, including grassroots activists, prominent political figures, religious leaders, and celebrities of the arts. Two U.S. Congressional Representatives (Nydia Velázquez from New York and Luis Gutierrez from Illinois) were among those removed from the protesters' camp on naval land in Vieques at the same time Congressman José Serrano

²⁸⁸ Jon Nordheimer, "Federal Agents Clear Puerto Rico Bombing Range of Protesters," *New York Times*, May 5, 2000.

²⁸⁹ This account of the protest at the U.N. comes from one of the participants, Mickey Melendez, in *We Took the Streets*.

(NY) was detained at the White House for his protest in May 2000. When a federal judge refused to issue a temporary restraining order to stop naval exercises in April 2001, attorney and environmentalist Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., actor James Edward Olmos, Local 1199 President Dennis Rivera, and Reverend Al Sharpton were among 140 people arrested for occupying a restricted area that caused the navy to delay bombing exercises.²⁹⁰ The “Vieques Four,” referring to Sharpton, New York City Councilman Adolfo Carrión Jr., State Assemblyman José Rivera, and former state legislator Roberto Ramirez, were sentenced to four-month prison terms along with forty others, including former nationalist prisoner, Lolita Lebrón, who was then in her eighties. Vieques Mayor Dámaso Serrano also spent four months in prison for his part in the protests.²⁹¹

Following the high-profile arrests, volunteers signed up in the U.S. and Puerto Rico to serve as human shields in Vieques. Many served prison sentences, including the Mayor of Vieques. The solidarity movement in the U.S. organized educational forums to give visibility to events as they occurred. Activists obtained support resolutions from trade unions, faculty associations, and local town and city councils. Following the testimony of Puerto Rican activists and their supporters, the resolution passed by the U.N. Committee on Decolonization on June 21, 2001

“urged the United States to immediately halt its military drills and manoeuvres on Vieques; return the occupied land to the people of Puerto Rico; halt the persecution, incarcerations, arrests and harassment of peaceful demonstrators; immediately release all persons incarcerated in that connection; respect fundamental rights; and decontaminate the impact areas.”²⁹²

²⁹⁰ Ivan Roman, “Navy Steels for Vieques Protests; Bombing Resumes Today After Navy Tear-Gassed Crowds and Made Arrests,” *Orlando Sentinel*, April 30, 2001.

²⁹¹ Eric Lipton, “Sharpton and 3 From Bronx Are Jailed In Vieques;” “National Briefing: South: Puerto Rico: Protester Freed,” *New York Times*, May 24, 2001 and December 12, 2001, respectively.

²⁹² United Nations’ Pres Release GA/COL/3053.

The death of David Sanes-Rodríguez was not the first civilian casualty of the naval occupation. But the incident stripped the Navy's claim of a "good neighbor policy" of any lingering legitimacy. For most of the preceding half-century, the U.S. media had paid little attention to political confrontations involving the pro-independence movement on the island or support for it in the United States. Even during periods of intense conflict and mass mobilizations, pro-independence groups were often portrayed as marginal sectors with minimal support from the island's residents or Puerto Ricans in the United States. The situation in Vieques was more difficult to characterize in this manner because the movement was not linked to any one position on the colonial issue and included support across the political spectrum. The movement grew because of a broad consensus, as Robert Kennedy observed, on "adherence to democracy" and "a strong system of justice."²⁹³ The exposure of the Navy's activities in Vieques through massive demonstrations, acts of civil disobedience, hunger strikes, and court cases brought a barrage of national and international criticism that eventually forced the U.S. government to relent and give up the occupied territory in Vieques on May 1, 2003, along with a promise to clean the toxic waste and thousands of unexploded bombs left behind.

How is the departure of the U.S. Navy from Vieques partly the achievement of radical politics and the Puerto Rican Left? After all, one of the first fishermen to risk his life in civil disobedience and confrontation with naval warships was Carlos Zenón, a pro-statehood; many supporters were identified with mainstream political parties. If Zenón had appealed to the mainstream political parties for assistance when he first visited the United States looking for support, it is extremely unlikely that leaders from those parties

²⁹³ Quoted in Linda Backiel, "The People of Vieques, Puerto Rico vs. the United States Navy," *Monthly Review* vol. 54, no. 9 (February 2003): 1-13.

would have sought to build a movement of the magnitude, energy, and commitment of the Vieques solidarity network initiated by activists of the Puerto Rican Left. Of course, the case of a people displaced, bombarded, and contaminated against their will by a military mammoth was by far easier to advocate for than that of prisoners convicted of shooting at a President's residence and in the halls of the Capitol.

The experience of Vieques is an excellent example of the Left overcoming sectarian differences and the politics of "correctness" and building a democratization movement from below. Mainstream actors were persuaded, not disenchanted, by the drastic measures the fishermen and their core allies used to call attention to their fight (McCaffrey 2006). Civil disobedience did not deter participation either. Celebrities and political leaders were moved to participate in contentious actions by the multiple ramifications of the naval occupations – including the health and environmental impact, the loss of residents' livelihood, and the injustice of an occupation that defied popular will.

Sandra Trujillo, formerly of MINP, who helped form and became a coordinator of the New York Committee, believes that the ability of activists to work together on the issue of Vieques provided valuable experience that led to future cooperative endeavors, particularly in New York City:

"There had always been tensions on the Left. This was one of the first successful efforts to put aside differences and develop an independent group.... Vieques gave us the opportunity to work together collaboratively. From the onset we presented it as an issue in which you didn't have to have a position on status. However, the case was a crass and blatant way of exposing the colonial relations between the United States and Puerto Rico. But we followed the cue of the fishermen and built a solid movement that we tailored to be broad-based. Our education project reflected

this. For instance, we focused on the disregard for human life.”²⁹⁴

Trujillo recalled that the initial Vieques Solidarity Network formed the basis for the National Congress on Puerto Rican Rights. In addition, many of the Vieques supporters in New York joined the coalition of Whites, Blacks, and Latinos that aided David Dinkins’ mayoral election.

Scholars’ assessments point to a number of factors to explain the 2003 outcome. The participation of experienced, committed cadres of the Left and the broad reach of the campaign were important, as was the post-Cold War “new focus on peace” that provided an opportunity for protest to develop and prevail. (McCaffrey 2006) Also, new activists interested in environmental concerns broadened the base of support for residents who fought and continue to fight the health and environmental hazards of the naval occupation.

The battle against the Navy is not over. Decontamination programs have lagged and Vieques suffers the highest rate of cancer, infant mortality, and overall mortality in Puerto Rico.²⁹⁵ In testimony given at the 2006 meeting of the U.N. Decolonization Committee, a stream of witnesses testified to deplorable conditions. Paraphrasing the testimony of fisherman Ismael Guadalupe Ortiz, the United Nations report stated that

“although the United States Navy had left Vieques on 1 May 2003, no court in Puerto Rico was able to attend to the thousands of abuses against Puerto Ricans, claiming it was beyond their jurisdiction....No agency, government branch or department could force the United States Navy to comply. Moreover, the Navy’s presence was still felt in the thousands of bomb craters, in the toxic materials dumped on land and in the sea and in the skin diseases, cancer and respiratory problems. The Navy also controlled the clean-up

²⁹⁴ Quote of Sandra Trujillo, formerly of EC-MINP, cited in McCaffrey (1998, 334); also discussed in my interview with Sandra Trujillo, 4/8/06.

²⁹⁵ See Backiel (2003); also Laura Rivera Meléndez, “Cancer Rate Continues to be High in Vieques,” *Puerto Rico Herald*, April 29, 2004.

process.... The Navy was detonating bombs...but refused to use alternative, less toxic methods. From August 2005 to June 2006, a total of 66 detonations had taken place, totaling 20 tons of explosives that had increased the level of pollutants in the atmosphere....The Colonial Government's Department of Health had been slow to conduct a civil study to determine levels of contamination, and neither the Navy nor the Department of Health had set up treatment for sick people or acquired equipment for special medical conditions, such as dialysis. There were no education programmes on the health impact on Vieques or epidemiological monitoring programmes in the community."²⁹⁶

Former members of El Comité-MINP and other organizations of the Puerto Rican Left are among those who remain active on this issue, both in the United States and Puerto Rico.

Conclusion

In 2008, many former activists of EC-MINP have a deeper appreciation of the obstacles to social change, as well as for the multitude of strategies and perspectives that may be incorporated into a progressive movement agenda. While most movements for social justice today do not speak of class struggle, proletarian revolution, or vanguard cadres, these movements may draw lessons from those Marxist-Leninists of the 1970s who believed that fighting racial oppression, and engaging allies in that endeavor, provided a concrete, practical basis for multi-ethnic unity.

The cadre formation, however, was flawed in the non-revolutionary environment of the United States. The expectations of members were so demanding and stringent that participants could not last more than five or six years without consequences to family and career. Despite the rhetoric of seeking "advanced workers," recruitment inherently favored students and individuals without children because workers and parents could not endure or were not attracted to the combined demands of work, child-rearing, and

²⁹⁶ United Nations GA/COL/3138/Rev. 1.June 2006

political commitment of the cadre. As MINP became engrossed in the multiple tasks that a larger and more widely recognized political party might have been better positioned to undertake, the members found little time to assess and reassess where and how they could be helpful, effectively distancing the organization from interacting at the grassroots level.

In this respect, with regard to ideological debates within the Left, the focus on national party-building produced a further disconnect between members and leadership bodies and between local communities and the organization overall. Bureaucratization frustrated efforts to evaluate accumulated political experience, to openly address political questions, and to engage in dynamic debates like those that had stimulated growth and creativity in the past. By the end of the 1970s, the composition of the organization shifted, reflecting the focus in MINP on party-building and solidarity work. The newest recruits came from the Left rather than from community-, workplace-, or campus struggles. Political tensions simmered between those members who were immersed in local activism and those who thought greater emphasis should be placed on the party-building. In the absence of an open debate, that had the potential to be contentious, the organization did not survive.

The last issues published of *Obreros en Marcha*, however, show a marked return to emphasizing local issues in more popular form, emulating the style of *Unidad Latina*. Moreover, by 1981 the organization began to question the constraints of its structure and its position on electoral politics. Though the Leninist cadre organization could not survive as a viable political force in the United States,²⁹⁷ former activists went on to

²⁹⁷ Many scholars of Latin American political development relate similar findings concerning the Latin American cadre organizations of the 1970s, noting in particular the influence of Gramsci in shifting the emphasis of the Left from focusing solely on the political struggle against the state to the realm of civil society, where multiple opportunities for cultivating democratization and counterhegemonic ideology are

participate in successful social movements and to occupy influential positions in public service. All of the members I interviewed (and others not interviewed but mentioned in the manuscript) have remained politically active, on the Left, in the nearly three decades since MINP's demise.

The movement to oust the Navy from Vieques integrated many of the components scholars observe as the sources of power in successful social movements. Effective framing confined to emphasizing the immediate consequences of U.S. military activities for the residents of Vieques resonated among diverse sectors of society. Identifiable and winnable goals convinced broad social networks that contentious repertoires, including civil disobedience, were righteous and worthy of personal sacrifice. The outcome of the prolonged battle reinforces the lesson that efforts to achieve broad consensus for democratization can be productive and rewarding.

currently pursued. See, for example, Evelina Dagnino, "Culture, Citizenship, and Democracy: Changing Discourses and Practices of the Latin American Left," in *Cultures of Politics, Politics of Culture*, eds. Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino and Arturo Escobar (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998).

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

*La era está pariendo un corazón,
no puede más, se muere de dolor
y hay que acudir corriendo
pues se cae el porvenir
en cualquier selva del mundo,
en cualquier calle.²⁹⁸*

Introduction

Several years ago, Daniel Colón listened while his mother and former El Comité member, Maria Collado, talked with me about her involvement in the housing and bilingual education movements and about the workplace activism of his father, Noel Colón, in the early 1970s. At the end of that session, I asked Daniel what he thought would be significant for his generation to draw from those experiences. In his reply (quoted here in part), he used language that, except perhaps in reference to social security and medicare programs, has all but disappeared from the national discourse since the 1980s: (Cox 1998; Fraser and Gordon 1998; Esping-Andersen 1996)

“It’s not about ‘them’ keeping us down. It’s about us standing up. There’s a need to fight for what you’re *entitled* to. You’re *entitled* to have a good job, a good life; your kids are *entitled* to a good education, whether or not you come from humble beginnings and public housing like my mom. From my own observations and the stories of my parents, I get the message. It’s kind of like, you know how the saying goes, ‘the more things change, the more they stay the same?’ There’s always a need to stand up.” (emphasis added) (Daniel Colón, 8/2/04)

In the 1970s, El Comité-MINP and similar urban-based groups protested for what they defined as fundamental democratic rights to decent housing, quality education and health care, and jobs. In New York City, activists opposed urban renewal plans to remove

²⁹⁸ Lyrics of Cuban “new song movement” songwriter, Silvio Rodríguez, translate roughly, as: The era is birthing a heart, it cannot bear anymore, it dies of pain. We must hurry and help; for the future lies in every forest, in every street.

low-income families from zones earmarked for redevelopment. They tried to democratize community school boards and to institute policies that would be more responsive to children ill-served by a discriminatory and under-funded education system. Minority workers sought jobs by confronting racist union hiring practices and the city's failure to implement affirmative action hiring programs. In many instances, activists tried to supersede the confines of strictly ethnic-based, competitive quests for political incorporation by seeking alliances with Whites and other minorities.

This concluding chapter returns to the objectives and findings of the dissertation, highlighting the insights gained from the study of the political activism of El Comité-MINP in the 1970s.

Principal Questions and Objectives

A prevalent notion about radical political movements of the 1970s, especially those who self-identified as Marxist-Leninist, is that these were mainly small groups comprised of students and largely irrelevant to the working class in the United States. Besides the anti-war protests that extended into the early 1970s, the U.S. Left in the period is known primarily for participating in solidarity networks that supported international democratization and revolutionary movements. The limited treatment of urban resistance movements of Puerto Ricans has mainly focused on the achievements and legacy of the Young Lords Organization in New York City from 1969 to 1972. This study of the origins and activism of El Comité-MINP through the 1970s adds multiple dimensions to the analysis of the resistance politics of working-class Puerto Rican activists and suggests that scholars' generalizations about the objectives and

achievements of Puerto Rican radicals or about the character and composition of “the Left” in the United States has so far been inadequate.

My first objective was to identify the factors that influenced El Comité to form and to participate in local protest movements. I sought to understand how the experiences of national identity, race, and class influenced the group’s political perspective and the mobilizing frames it developed in various struggles. Taking into consideration the national and local political opportunity structures in the early 1970s, as well as changes in those structures in the middle and end of the decade, I examined the dynamics and outcomes of democratic rights’ campaigns, identifying the immediate conditions leading to protest, the targets and tactics of participants, as well as opportunities for alliances.

My second main objective was to analyze how political identity was shaped and transformed through political experience and collective ideological processes. El Comité became more ideologically committed as it studied political theory and interacted with other political movements. It was important, therefore, to view how ideological development affected mobilizing experiences.

This study demonstrates the impact that intersecting experiences of national identity, race, and class, may have on people’s ability to develop alternative interpretations to the dominant explanations of social reality – and to resist. The analyses of the protest politics of the group of New York City-based Puerto Rican radical activists of the 1970s, El Comité-MINP, essentially confirms the partial – or measured – effectiveness of protest that uses disruptive tactics and persuasive, inclusive mobilizing frames, within the structural constraints of our society. It also demonstrates

National Identity, Race, and Class as Factors of Political Socialization

It is evident that national origin (particularly from a country under colonial rule), as well as class and race relations, predisposed many Puerto Ricans in the 1970s to distrust elite perspectives and promises. The colonial experience, including economic dislocation and the repression of the nationalist movement in Puerto Rico, combined with mass migration to the United States in the decades following World War II, partly explained why Puerto Rican residents were receptive to housing protests that erupted on the West Side of Manhattan in 1970. The tendency to side with “the people” was fueled by the underemployment, inferior housing conditions, and the discrimination they faced as racialized migrants or children of migrants about whom the larger society knew or cared very little.²⁹⁹ Independent of their common experiences as Puerto Ricans, the influence of anti-war protests, and the prior and existing political movements of the Third World Left, including Black and Brown power movements and especially the militancy of the Young Lords, also influenced many young Puerto Ricans of the period to seek radical political alternatives.

Understanding these factors as contributing to politicization, it is easy to grasp why the original group of friends, some with families, joined tenant takeovers occurring on the West Side in defiance of urban renewal. While the challenge to urban renewal plans on Manhattan’s West Side initially took form as spontaneous outbursts of anger and frustration, the movement became more coordinated and sustained as activists took

²⁹⁹ Sanchez (2007) suggests that one reason for persistent relative powerlessness of Puerto Ricans in the United States is that the larger society does not find value in much of what Puerto Ricans have offered in labor or culture. While my study takes issue with this view of the power relationship, there is clearly truth in the argument that the majority of U.S. society, including New Yorkers in particular, knew or cared little about Puerto Rican newcomers and was ignorant of the historical relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States.

advantage of the potential leverage they could wield against city and private sector elites by catalyzing and organizing low-income, mostly minority tenants who squatted in occupied buildings. The housing movement created El Comité as a community organization concerned with “defending the people.” Some of its early members were influenced by their awareness of the repression of nationalists in Puerto Rico, by the pro-independence critique of colonialism, and by the militancy of the Young Lords who had recently formed in East Harlem. Their shared cultural background, experiences with discrimination in New York City schools, as underemployed or unemployed workers, and as residents of urban renewal zones in Upper Manhattan made them not only receptive to contentious actions against the city’s collaboration with real estate developers but determined to sustain the challenge.

Comparable studies of Chicano, Black, and Asian radical organizations in the same period also found that the same combination of factors – national identity, race, and class – influenced people from those communities to defy mainstream interpretations (or narratives) that justify oppression – and to develop corresponding forms of resistance.

Political Opportunities, Framing, Alliances, and Disruption in Effective Mobilizations

The local and national environment was more conducive to successful protest movements in the first half, as compared to the second half, of the decade. The squatters’ movement came on the heels of civil rights’ protests, social legislation that acknowledged the nation’s history of exclusion, and the promises of the War on Poverty. Locally, urban decay and housing shortages topped the city’s agenda, and the liberal administration of Mayor Lindsay supported affirmative action employment programs and was somewhat sympathetic to low-income residents. In light of widespread riots and urban resistance

movements around the country in the late 1960s, as well as the widespread criticism levied at New York City's Police Department for brutality in minority communities and its violent treatment of Columbia University student protesters in 1968, the city hesitated in using force to remove the squatters. But neither the city nor other institutions could simply suppress or ignore the squatters.

As shown in Chapter 2, when families on the West Side of Manhattan participated in the housing movement by squatting in city-owned, landlord-abandoned, vacant buildings and in privately owned buildings slated for redevelopment, with broad support from tenant advocates, anti-poverty organizations, some political elites, and religious figures, participants managed to negotiate compromises with the city enabling squatters to remain in some of the occupied buildings. "Operation Move-In" activists also elicited the promise from the city to raise the number of units to be allocated to low-income families in high-rise development projects. Though his administration made no attempt to derail the urban renewal plans inherited from prior administrations, Mayor Lindsay could not easily repress the protesters without alienating significant allies. Despite Lindsay's reluctance to use force, when the movement did not subside after the initial takeovers, the city forcibly removed some of the squatters with a large show of its Tactical Patrol Force. The use of force and the threat of further force, along with the city's commitment to create additional low-income housing units and to bring dislocated families back to the area, helped to demobilize the movement. Its gains, while real, turned out to be less than originally expected and short-lived, because subsequently the city evaded its promise by enforcing housing eligibility criteria that many families could not meet.

As many scholars have noted about the rise and fall of contentious politics, the city defused the movement through a combination of compromise and repression. In the process, the victory, even if partial and temporary, reaffirmed the “anti-system” perspective of activists and reinforced their belief in the potential leverage of contentious, grassroots action. Piven (2006) maintains that the power potential in social movements partly depends on people’s ability to defy the dominant interpretations of social relations and to disrupt those relations. As the housing struggle covered in Chapter 2 made clear, the “anti-system” mobilizing frame resonated with low-income, Latino residents in the West Side; and disruptive, contentious tactics worked and were perceived as working.

The “anti-system” perspective of El Comité became more specifically embedded and framed rhetorically as struggles for “democratic rights” in campaigns for bilingual education and media inclusion of Latinos, and in workplace activism. The democratic rights’ frame elevated activists’ sense of entitlement and encouraged alliances. Bilingual education (at least in District 3 of Manhattan) and the protests at PBS were multiethnic endeavors and accomplishments. Unlike contemporary programs for immigrant children that emphasize the acquisition of English-language skills but do not nurture first language skills, bilingual/bicultural education in the 1970s represented a pedagogical approach to improving literacy and promoting mutual cultural awareness among children from various backgrounds. As highlighted in Chapter 3, the successful quest for bilingual education in District 3 included White parents, along with Latinos, who believed multicultural education enriched all children.³⁰⁰ Socially diverse sectors of the community embraced the cause of “quality education.”

³⁰⁰ ASPIRA “Conference on Bilingual Education Report,” March 1973, in Joseph Monserrat Archives, Box 10, Folder 10; “Statement” by Joseph Monserrat, President of the Board of Education of New York City, to

In workplace organizing, El Comité's activists in the construction, auto, and steel industries confronted the difficulty of trying to mount effective resistance to workplace conditions where existing unions were largely unresponsive. These experiences recounted in Chapter 3 indicate the political constraints organizers faced in trying to challenge entrenched leaders and unhealthy work conditions, where union leaders red-baited organizers and employers threatened workers who pursued grievances with layoffs.

The group's most significant workplace accomplishment occurred through the Black and Puerto Rican Construction Workers Coalition. When minority workers occupied the construction site at City College, the State Dormitory Authority agreed that the workers should be hired. However, while the protesting workers received support for their quest from students, the local electricians' union excluded minorities and tried to prevent minority, non-union workers from being hired. Following further demonstrations that erupted into violence between White workers on the job and minority workers seeking employment, some minority workers were eventually hired. The outcome represented a major step in opening employment opportunities to minority workers in construction; but the campaign highlighted the competition between employed and unemployed workers that exclusive unions framed in terms of racial antagonisms. It reinforced the political constraints of race-based occupational segmentation on "multi-ethnic workers' unity."

Still, the framing of grievances as quests for legitimate rights conveyed a sense of entitlement to excluded and oppressed sectors involved in local reform movements and, in many instances, also appealed to mainstream sectors that supported the broad

objectives of fairness and democratization. The strategy took advantage of the vulnerability of elites to the charge that they denied legitimate and just rights. At the same time, job contraction, urban decay, and encroaching fiscal crisis exacerbated racial antagonisms and community-based competition throughout New York City; and the election of Mayor Beame in 1974 marked a decisive turn to the right in the ruling coalitions in the city.

Construction of Political Identity: Nationalism to Marxism-Leninism

Within a few months of forming in 1970, El Comité identified itself as a Puerto Rican pro-independence organization and participated with other Puerto Rican organizations in protest actions and educational forums to build support for independence. At the same time, however, its origins and involvement in movements for community control and its political studies generated the view that Puerto Ricans should focus on empowerment and democratization in the United States and become more deeply integrated into a broader movement for socialism in the U.S. The initial nationalist identity found a broader context as the group developed an anti-imperialist critique and a “third-world” affinity as people of color.

The idea of socialist revolution gained appeal in EC-MINP as activists reflected on their experiences and studied political theory. Believing that minorities could contribute toward building a unified workers’ movement by defying racial oppression and stimulating a broader awareness of it, these activists defined their priorities as fighting for local reforms primarily in Puerto Rican communities while, at the same time, presenting the case against capitalism and for socialism.

As El Comité's embrace of nationalism and gradual transition from a community action group to a Marxist-Leninist cadre organization demonstrated, ideological influences, stemming from the study of political theory, the input of intellectuals, and relationships with other revolutionary movements, were pivotal in the different phases of the organization. Scholars have observed that various elements of political involvement – the experience of protest, collective interaction, exposure to ideas and other movements – can raise political consciousness, organically generate ideological commitment, and transform the life-paths of participants. The evolution of political identity, recounted in Chapter 3, shows the intense process members underwent in trying to become a formidable force for resistance. They grappled with questions related to how political activism affected their personal lives, including religious practices, parenting, and gender oppression. The women, in particular, challenged the men to examine chauvinistic attitudes and domestic expectations.

Influenced by Latin American revolutionary movements and the typical practice of communist parties around the world, and by the study of political theory and doctrines, EC-MINP adopted the Leninist-inspired structure of a cadre formation. Though democratic centralism elevated the principle of ideological unity in ways that eventually constrained open discussion and debate, the fear of government harassment and infiltration justified for many radical activists of the period the establishment of strict lines of internal communication and rules for membership. The idea that ideological unity should not be broken in public was viewed as protection from individuals or institutions that might want to foster dissent within the group. In practice, however, ideological intransigence obstructed democratic debate internally; and nuanced debates over paths to

revolution within the broader Marxist Left were irrelevant to activists in local struggles over conditions that directly affected their lives.

However, to extract from the experience of the radical Left solely the weaknesses of the democratic centralist model or the rhetorical and practical shortcomings of the doctrine of proletarian revolution would be to miss the democratizing influence on social and cultural institutions of local popular movements in the period. The key elements of the achievements in housing, in bilingual education, in opening media outlets to broader inclusion, and in implementing affirmative action hiring policies were that disruptive tactics worked, that people were motivated to join and to support protesters, and that movements did indeed make gains in fighting discrimination and inequality.

Duality of Purpose: The Reflection of Ideology in Political Practice

EC-MINP's political program in the late 1970s reveals the paradoxical impact of ideas and ideology on political action. On the one hand, the commitment to participate at the leadership level in a dialogue with similar Left organizations about how to form a new communist party in the U.S. began to distance the organization from its local base and the commitments and actions that gave rise to it. Ideological intransigence, the desire to achieve one, unified strategic vision of radical political mobilization, created tensions between members and leading bodies as well as within leading bodies.

On the other hand, the ideology reinforced the belief in the power of mass, disruptive action from below and the efficacy of local activism. Political education and ideology played a positive, transforming role as well in MINP's politics of resistance and in the lives of individual activists. It would be difficult to attribute specific policy outcomes to activists' political studies, or to the development of members' analytic and

practical skills. Though less tangible, it is evident that these organic processes, undertaken collectively, contribute to people's ability to understand the larger social forces and relations of power, to develop (or articulate) alternative perspectives (for example, on everything ranging from the fiscal crisis in mid-decade to U.S. foreign policy), and to look for ways to produce change through political action.

As a prime example, contained in Chapter 4, the Latin Women's Collective provided many ordinary, neighborhood with their first political engagement. Insofar as normal, routine, private life does not encourage critical social analysis nor do the dominant ideological institutions, the Latin Women's Collective encouraged the interaction among women and the development of skills that elevated the sense of personal and collective power essential for change. I regard this type of project – in this case of the Puerto Rican Left – as one that contributed to participants' empowerment and which, in general, is a source of potential power in social movement. The Latin Women's Collective promoted broad-based discussions among Latina women about labor, health, family, and education issues and incorporated many women into political action. As a result of the Collective's efforts to draw working-class women into the political sphere, dozens of women became involved in a myriad of activities, including research, coordinating forums, developing informational campaigns and producing literature, as well as preparing and delivering presentations.

At SUNY Old Westbury, EC-MINP helped to build a multi-ethnic coalition in a successful movement against attempts by the college and central SUNY administrations to alter the demographic diversity of the student population and to weaken popular programs. In the Coalition in Defense of Puerto Rican and Hispanic Rights, activists

opposed the Koch Administration's proposed health care cuts and led the successful campaign to keep Metropolitan Hospital in East Harlem open. Though ruling coalitions and budget priorities had shifted and competition for resources intensified, the Coalition built bridges between hospital staff, medical personnel, community residents, and political elites to attain their objective.

However, structural economic and political changes reduced opportunities for positive protest outcomes in the second half of the 1970s. New York City's worst fiscal crisis, together with more conservative local electoral coalitions, national recession, and local and national economic restructuring, intensified competition for scarce resources, constrained local and state budgetary prerogatives, and negatively impacted the national discourse on entitlements and rights. As the 1980s began, although the finance and real estate sectors led economic revitalization, the opportunities for good-paying union jobs shrank while low-wage service sectors grew and income inequality intensified. For example, the median family income of Puerto Ricans fell from 53 percent of median family income of Whites in 1970 to 40 percent in 1980; median family income of African Americans dropped from 69 percent that of Whites in 1970 to 57 percent in 1980.³⁰¹ The massive residential and commercial gentrification that followed further dispersed many low- and middle-income families living in Manhattan to the outer boroughs and elsewhere. (Sassen 2001) Nationally, economic restructuring was accommodated first by the Nixon and Ford administrations' "new federalism" (Mollenkopf 1992, 14) and continued with the Reagan administration's assault on federal entitlements and deregulation of significant private industries, intensifying pressures on local and state governments to decrease social spending.

³⁰¹ Figures compiled from median family income figures in Torres 1995, 63.

Like similar radical organizations of the period, EC-MINP was not organizationally or ideologically prepared in the early 1980s to attempt to coordinate with other groups (such as the Puerto Rican Socialist Party) the type of large-scale local response in New York City that might have offered, at the very least, greater vocal opposition to budget service cuts and retrenchment policies. Many individual activists tried to do just that by rallying residents, co-workers, and students to fight cuts in day care, health, and education. By this point, however, with the leadership immersed in ideologically-driven party-building debates, with members scattered among numerous neighborhood-based endeavors and international solidarity campaigns, EC-MINP became increasingly ineffective locally.

Understanding that a national movement was needed to mount a strong challenge to affirmative action setbacks and to state and corporate attacks on labor in the U.S., EC-MINP joined national coalitions in the late 1970s and early 1980s to rally in Washington, D.C. But the core of radical activists in these coalitions was neither large enough nor unified enough to pose a challenge to these policies through the 1980s. Ultimately, El Comité-MINP disintegrated after an internally fractious episode that proved the inflexibility of the democratic centralist model in accommodating dissent. Likewise, in other Marxist-Leninist organizations of the period, including the PSP, the organizations Pulido (2006) discusses from Los Angeles such as CASA and East Wind, and the groups Elbaum (2002) describes as part of the “new communist movement,” the concern with theoretical development, party-building, or proletarian revolution, at the expense of practical reflection on grassroots mobilization distanced them from the population they sought to reach.

As the case materials discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 confirm, it is symptomatic of ideological intransigence to elevate the principle of ideological unity above practical political work. Democratic centralism restricts the space for individuals or units within the organization to pursue paths that do not reflect the official position of the organization. Therefore, when differences emerge over whether a political practice accurately reflects the political line, participants become immobilized or immersed in internal conflict. However, it is essential to recall that government repression – both confirmed and suspected – reinforced those aspects of democratic centralism that provided a measure of protection for members and for the group from random harassment and persecution. In addition, red-baiting by political opponents added to the rationale for caution in revealing members' political affiliation. The ideological marginalization of the Left in the national political discourse is a persistent quandary of socialists, communists, and radicals in general in the United States.

In sum, most of the protest campaigns in which EC-MINP was involved, disruptive tactics were effective. The building takeovers, street rallies, traffic disruptions, formal meeting interruptions, the interruptions of meetings and, in the case of PBS, interrupting the taping of show, placed the ball clearly in the opponents' court. They had to respond to the disruption before business could resume. The SUNY Old Westbury strikes and occupations of administrative buildings and the repeated civil disobedience in the Vieques movement were classic and effective movement strategies.

Significantly, though, when Puerto Ricans mobilized for actions related to independence, such as the Puerto Rican Day parade episode in 1971, the police used no restraint in violently attacking and dispersing demonstrators. Though the FBI denied it

for years after COINTELPRO was exposed in the mid-1970s, current files retrieved by Congressman Serrano and now in the hands of the Center for PR Studies indicate that FBI surveillance and harassment of pro-independence groups and individuals was rampant.

Repression, in the form of government harassment and surveillance, helps explain difficulties activists faced in the period. Although I critique the concept and structure of democratic centralism as eventually damaging the potential for unity and broad-based actions, the security measures that constrained open communication and debate provided a degree of protection from government infiltration and harassment. Long before the post-9/11 anti-terrorism justification for violating civil liberties, the U.S. government acted as though all pro-independence groups and many others on the Left uniformly condoning terrorist methods.

Conclusion

In 1980, activists in El Comité-MINP began to question whether electoral politics in New York City, shunned to this point, should be reconsidered as an arena for pursuing greater political influence. Though the organization did not last long enough to pursue the debate as a group, for several reasons many former members came to embrace the view that electoral and institutional participation could provide one forum for pressing a progressive agenda. The party-building movement had no mass appeal; the rhetoric of proletarian revolution ignored the reality that workers were divided along racial, gender, and occupational lines; and workers held a variety of political and cultural views which the rhetoric did not concretely address. Moreover, conservatives were using popular electoral and legislative processes quite successfully to promote regressive candidates

and policies that attacked even the minor gains made during the prior two decades in labor rights, affirmative action, housing, social programs, and, especially in relation to Central America, in foreign policy.

After MINP dissolved, officially in 1984 but in practical terms in 1981, some former members began to work in city government, public service agencies, and non-profit organizations. In 1989, several former members joined “Latinos for Dinkins” in what they viewed as a progressive coalition with African Americans to elect David Dinkins as Mayor. According to these individuals, the citywide alliance between Blacks and Puerto Ricans that campaigned for Mayor Dinkins included many former activists from the revolutionary organizations of the 1970s. It was an opportunity, they thought, to work toward greater unity between African Americans and Latinos, which had long been a goal of El Comité, and to influence government policy in New York City. After the election, a few held prominent positions in the Dinkins’ Administration from 1990 to 1993. In Brentwood, Long Island, one former member was elected to the Brentwood School Board in 1990. Former members ultimately turned their attention to families and careers (or at least paid greater attention to their prospects for steady employment (which had been a secondary concern while in MINP), but most have remained politically active over the course of the past few decades.

As explained in Chapter 5, the movement to remove the U.S. Navy from Vieques, beginning in 1979 and revitalized in the late 1990s, specifically demonstrates how former members of MINP and other Puerto Rican Left organizations applied the lessons of their experience to build a Support Network that embraced vital components of successful social movements. Core activists resisted framing the movement in terms that expected

potential participants and allies to believe in one status resolution – independence – for Puerto Rico. The residents of Vieques themselves held diverse political beliefs and affiliations. By focusing on the Navy’s violations of economic, civil, and human rights, the Support Network managed to integrate activists from diverse sectors, including religious leaders, prominent political figures, and celebrities, into a coalition willing to pursue disruptive tactics, as well as legal channels, to support the fishermen who defied naval exercises by driving their boats into prohibited waters.

The Vieques campaign held broad appeal as a movement against an arbitrary, authoritarian, and environmentally and economically damaging occupation in which the residents had no voice. The movement serves as an example of the success of radical activists in including, rather than alienating, broad sectors in the cause of democratization, to the extent that large numbers of mainstream participants engaged in acts of civil disobedience and went to jail to defy the naval occupation. Though radical activists initiated the support movement, mainstream sectors joined contentious political action that forced the navy’s exit in 2003.

Though many of the former members of EC-MINP view the electoral arena as one avenue for promoting a progressive “rights” agenda, all those I interviewed remain convinced that challenges to existing power relations are most effective when large numbers of people become involved in direct, contentious action to transform those relations. Former members of EC-MINP continue to be politically active – protesting the Iraq War, fighting for better housing and education in the South Bronx, and opposing gentrifying development policies in parts of Brooklyn. Activists work in labor unions and in non-profit environmental and child advocacy agencies. Several actively promote the

independence of Puerto Rico. Some are professionals working in public service – as attorneys, educators, and health care professionals. All the activists I interviewed retain their critical political perspectives and are reserved in their expectations of electoral processes.

McAdam (1999) points out that the few systematic studies tracing the behavior of 1960s' activists through subsequent decades have consistently found that former activists continued to espouse Left political attitudes, remained active in contemporary movements, and for the most part pursued teaching or service professions. He suggests that “sustained activism” should be added to the list of behavioral experiences (along with education, family background, military service) that potentially change a person's biography. Less tangible in terms of long-term impact but nonetheless significant is the part El Comité-MINP played in drawing many people, especially women, into the public sphere and lifelong political participation.

It is true, as Piven (2006) notes, that with relatively little sustained exercise of disruptive power potential by subordinate groups, deep transformations in power relations have been rare. In an environment where elites dominate the main ideological institutions that tend to justify and to reinforce subordination, how do people develop alternative explanations, the will, and the strategies to challenge elite policies? As widely recognized, the answers lie in specific historical circumstances, in the complex processes and interactions that include conscious actors in collective interchange, who develop their capacities organically and in interaction with other organizations, intellectuals, and theoretical and ideological doctrines.

In New York City in the 1970s, the economic, political, social, and cultural conditions stemming from the intersection of national identity, race, and class, discredited the dominant narratives of elites that blamed the poor for their socioeconomic position. Puerto Rican activists challenged the exclusionary environment in New York City at a time when overt racial scapegoating was common. The experiences recounted by EC-MINP's participants showed that when popular movements stood up to challenge dominant elites and their explanations for subordination, they were effective. El Comité's members were organizers who believed it was essential to resist the harsh and oppressive material conditions of minority workers and families. At the same time, they struggled to understand and to illustrate the links between local struggles and the structural exploitation of workers in U.S. capitalism where racism functioned as a dominant strategy for discouraging class unity.

The similarity between the political agendas of Puerto Rican radical activists in the 1970s and the broad democratic rights embraced by Franklin D. Roosevelt in his 1944 State of the Union address to Congress is striking:

“[W]e cannot be content, no matter how high that general standard of living may be, if some fraction of our people –whether it be one-third or one-fifth or one-tenth – is ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-housed, and insecure....

[T]rue individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence....In our day these economic truths have become *accepted as self-evident*. We have accepted...a second Bill of Rights under which a new basis of security and prosperity can be established for all—regardless of station, race, or creed:

The right to a useful and remunerative job...
 The right to earn enough to provide adequate food and clothing and recreation;
 The right of every farmer to raise and sell his products at a return which will give him and his family a decent living;
 The right of every businessman, large and small, to trade in

an atmosphere of freedom from unfair competition and domination
by monopolies at home or abroad;
The right of every family to a decent home;
The right to adequate medical care...
The right to adequate protection from the economic fears of old age,
sickness, accident, and unemployment;
The right to a good education....

*America's own rightful place in the world depends in large part upon how fully these and similar rights have been carried into practice for our citizens.*³⁰² (emphasis added)

The struggles of national minorities against structural poverty and for greater social and economic power are comparable to the struggles for workplace rights of White and Black workers in the 1930s and subsequently to fulfill the rhetorical promise of the New Deal. For those workers who benefited from rising unionization, Post-World War II economic expansion, and increased workers' rights, as well as from social security and government-assisted home-buying programs, the promise may have seemed fulfilled. However, for those workers excluded from economic expansion and from the power potential of organized labor, structural poverty persisted through the period of 1950s and 1960s economic growth. The political power movements of minority activists in the late 1960s and 1970s sought to ensure that the rhetorical promise of 1960s social legislation became translated into concrete material improvements in their quality of life. Their greatest successes came when they, like Roosevelt, framed their demands in the rhetoric of rights and entitlements, rather than the ideological rhetoric of class struggle.

Similarly, throughout Latin America, many of the revolutionary movements and activists of the 1970s that influenced the formation of El Comité-MINP and other "third-world" organizations in the United States, regrouped in the 1980s, to frame their

³⁰²Franklin D. Roosevelt, Excerpt from 11 January 1944 message to Congress on the State of the Union, cited in *The Public Papers & Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt* Vol. XIII. ed. Samuel Rosenman. NY: Harper, 1950, 40-42, <http://worldpolicy.org/projects/globalrights/econrights/fdr-econbill.html>.

challenges to dictatorships and authoritarian regimes as struggles for “the right to have rights;” and in the early 21st century broader Left coalitions exert significant political, economic, and social influence in countries throughout the region.³⁰³ There are parallels to these pursuits for democratization, as well, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and in the platforms of contemporary, transnational campaigns for economic justice and human rights.³⁰⁴ One of the favorite slogans of El Comité-MINP and of progressive social movements worldwide captures the continuity of the quest for fairness and equity: “*The struggle continues.*”

³⁰³ Evelina Dagnino, “Culture, Citizenship, and Democracy: Changing Discourses and Practices of the Latin American Left,” in *Cultures of Politics, Politics of Culture*, eds. Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino and Arturo Escobar (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998).

³⁰⁴ See Articles 7, 22, 23, 24, 25, and 26 of the *Declaration*, and contemporary discussions of transnational activism, including Marina Prieto, Angela Hadjipateras and Jane Turner, “The Potential of Codes as Part of Women’s Organizations’ Strategies for Promoting the Rights of Women Workers: A Central America Perspective,” in Jenkins, Pearson, and Seyfang, eds. (2002); Congress of South African Trade Unions, “A Strategic Perspective on the International Trade Union Movement for the 21st Century,” July 2001, <http://www.cosatu.org.za/docs/2001/icftu-mr.htm>; and Donatella Della Porta, ed. *The Global Justice Movement: Cross-National and Transnational Perspectives*. (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2007).

Appendix A

Poem written for El Comité-MINP on the occasion of its
First Assembly, October 1978
by Karen Slotnick

It's autumn and the earth is turning
back into itself
for rest and renewal.
But for us, this is the first day of spring,
a new beginning in a universe
of new beginnings.

I could be talking about a seed that turns
into a mango tree, or,
since we are of the city,
of the brick that is turned into a building.
I am talking of something that started
on a corner of earth
in a corner of time.

Today we stand for a moment in that space
between where we have been
and where we are going
to look at what the earth taught us
as it turned, one thousand times,
around the sun.
We enter this new beginning, this spring,
with twelve seasons of knowledge and love
to guide us,
as our roots grow deep and grow strong,
as we weave ourselves into this living earth
of people and struggle.

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