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28 Morales was one of a handful of women in the early years of the organization. She served as the Party's deputy minister of education and, along with other women, confronted male chauvinism and sexism within the group and made the group more responsive to women's issues and rights. Some years later, after the organization disbanded, she received a law degree from New York University, became an educator, and worked for the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund (PRLDEF). Directing *¡Palante, Siempre Palante!* led Morales to create the Latino/a Education Network Service (LENS), a community empowerment nonprofit organization that uses visual media to foster dialogue on social and political issues relevant to the Latino community. She is currently the executive director of the Union Square Awards program, a philanthropic initiative in New York City aimed at supporting groundbreaking grassroots projects or organizations that address pressing social issues.

In “PALANTE, SIEMPRE PALANTE!: The Young Lords,” the selection that follows, Morales addresses her working-class background and role as a U.S.-born Puerto Rican who eventually became a translator between her migrant parents and English-speaking society. She describes some of her experiences growing up Puerto Rican in New York City, discusses what led her to join the Young Lords, provides an insider’s view of the organizations’ achievements and weaknesses, and notes its place in the history of Puerto Ricans in the United States.

The former Young Lord Pablo “Yoruba” Guzmán is a media journalist and, like most former members of the Young Lords’ leadership, still active in consciousness-raising community-oriented projects. The son of a U.S.-born Cuban mother and a Puerto Rican father, Guzmán was born in Spanish Harlem and raised in the South Bronx. He was eighteen years old and a college student at the State University of New York at Old Westbury when he joined the Sociedad de Albizu Campos and later the Young Lords, eventually becoming the Party’s minister of information. A semester in Mexico during his first year in college helped connect Guzmán with his Latino roots. As a black Puerto Rican growing up in New York City, Guzmán also identified with the civil rights struggles of African Americans. He once stated that “Before people called me a spic, they called me a nigger.”

During his post-Young Lords years, Guzmán worked for WBAI-FM and was briefly its programming director. He published numerous articles in the *Village Voice* and in *Latin New York*, a magazine geared to the Latino community and that focused on music and performance. He has won Emmy Awards as a television reporter, working for WNBC and later for CBS News in New York. Guzmán shared his early experiences as a member of the Young Lords in the volume *Palante: Young Lords Party* (1971), where in a sentence he attempted to capture the essence of the organization: "We're trying to make a society where opportunity is the rule for everybody." More than two decades later, he recounts the history and activities of the Young Lords and summarizes the organization's main accomplishments in "La Vida Pura: A Lord of the Barrio." This essay, which appears below, was originally published in the *Village Voice* in 1995 and was reprinted in *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora*.

IRIS MORALES

b. 1948

¡PALANTE, SIEMPRE PALANTE!: The Young Lords

A CHILDHOOD AS "GO-BETWEEN"

My parents came to the United States during the Puerto Rican migration of the late 1940s. My mother came from the northwest town of Aguadilla to work in the garment industry as a sewing-machine operator. My father, a sugarcane cutter from Sabana Grande, worked as an elevator operator in several New York City hotels. They met and married in the United States and raised four daughters. As the oldest child, I became the translator for my parents, serving as the bridge between the Puerto Rican culture and the American way of life. Other family members would bring letters they received from North American institutions asking me to translate from English into Spanish and write any required English response. Neighbors would regularly ask my mother's permission for me to accompany them to the Social Security office, the worker's compensation or welfare office, or any other place where English only was spoken. Often when on a translating trip at the hospital or local school with my mother or a neighbor, another person—a Spanish-speaking stranger—would also require and request translating assistance.

The role as “go-between” helped in my later radicalization because I got to see institutional practices up close. I got to feel the disdain and injustices with which people, bureaucrats, and institutions responded to Puerto Ricans. I experienced the mistreatment and humiliation. It seemed that all the institutions—from the local school to the Social Security office to the hospital emergency room—were willing to experiment with and throw away our lives. I felt the disrespect and the lack of understanding of people who are poor, who speak another language, and who are of a different skin color. These experiences with institutional racism were imprinted somewhere in my consciousness. Later when I read about the racist practices of U.S. institutions in other communities or countries, I connected with it and thought, yes, I have seen them do that. Yes, I know how the holders of power exploit poor communities. Those early experiences were invaluable in becoming a political person and being able to maneuver the system to survive.

LEADING UP TO THE YOUNG LORDS EXPERIENCE

My political awakening began while I was in high school. I learned that the U.S. government forced Native Americans to live on reservations and interned Japanese Americans in concentration camps during World War II. Through some school friends, I attended youth meetings of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), and I marched in demonstrations against the Vietnam War.

After graduating from high school, I became a tenant organizer with the West Side Block Association, a neighborhood storefront set up by a group of Columbia University students. We went knocking door-to-door, talking to

people about housing problems—everything from lack of heat and hot water to vermin infestation. We represented tenants in court and conducted rent strikes, organizing people to fight for decent and humane living conditions.

Later when I entered City College, I joined ONYX, the African American student organization; there were no Puerto Rican or Latino organizations on campus. I studied African American history and especially the teachings of Malcolm X. As the number of Puerto Rican students increased on campus, we organized the first Puerto Rican group, called Puerto Ricans in Student Activities (PRISA).

During this time, I was also working as a teacher in the Academy for Black and Latin Education (ABLE), a storefront school on 105th Street and Columbus Avenue. Several African American men from the neighborhood created the school; we had attended school together and knew the neglect of the public school system first hand. ABLE was an alternative way for young people to complete their high-school equivalency diploma. But as we taught our classes, many of our students, who were addicted to heroin, nodded out in class and were unable to learn. When we searched for treatment services, we found none. St. Luke's, the local hospital, was completely unresponsive to our concerns. As a result, ABLE organized a takeover of the hospital administrative offices demanding services. Out of the takeover, ABLE successfully negotiated the first thirteen hospital beds in the city to specifically treat drug addiction among adolescents.

Around this time I participated in cultural activities at the East Wind in Harlem and at the Gut Theater in *El Barrio* where I met many emerging poets, writers, and political leaders of the day. Although impressed with the artistic and intellectual vibrancy of the cultural movement, I was disappointed with those who justified the second-class position of women of color as a positive cultural legacy. Also in *El Barrio*, I connected with the Real Great Society¹ and joined a bus load of Latinos and Latinas and African Americans on a trip through the Midwest to the Crusade for Justice Conference in Denver, Colorado, in 1968.² It was there that I first met Jose "Cha Cha" Jiménez and other members of the Chicago Young Lords.

Cha Cha, a soft-spoken and unassuming leader, told us that the Young Lords were originally a street gang that developed in Chicago during the 1950s to protect neighborhood territory. Cha Cha, a member since 1959, had been in and out of jail for petty offenses. In jail, he met Fred Hampton, the leader of the Chicago Black Panther Party, who introduced him to political ideas. They talked about the movement for Black liberation and discussed building unity between Blacks and Puerto Ricans. When Cha Cha got out of jail, he returned to his neighborhood and organized the Young Lords to protest the city's urban renewal plans that would have uprooted the Puerto Rican/Latino community. It was 1968, and the gang, while protesting urban removal, was transformed into the Young Lords Organization (later the Young Lords Party). They designed a button with a map of Puerto

1. An antipoverty advocacy group founded on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in 1964 by former gang leaders. The East Harlem branch, dedicated to "total environmental control," was

formed in 1967.
2. The group Crusade for Justice was founded and directed by Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales (see p. 787).

Rico and the slogan, "*Tengo Puerto Rico En Mi Corazón*" ("I have Puerto Rico in my heart"). They went door-to-door promoting community control and self-determination for Puerto Ricans and pressured institutions to respond to the concerns of the surrounding Latino community. The Young Lords Organization set up "serve the people" programs and united with the Black Panthers and the Young Patriots (a radical hillbilly group) to organize the Rainbow Coalition. From the streets of the second-largest Puerto Rican community in the United States, the Young Lords Organization was becoming known as fighters for the equality of Puerto Ricans.

The winter after the Denver conference, I traveled to Cuba where supporters from every country in the world gathered to participate in the tenth anniversary celebration of the Cuban Revolution. While I was in Cuba, my fellow Latino and Latina and African American students at City College took over the university demanding open admissions and African American and Latino/Latina studies. From the Cuba trip, I returned to Harlem University where the takeover was still in progress.

Within six months, I was working with the Young Lords in *El Barrio*. Joining the Young Lords was a natural progression of the activism I had been involved in and the ideology for liberation that I was developing.

THE YOUNG LORDS' ACHIEVEMENTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Puerto Rican Pride, Political Militancy

At a significant historical moment, Puerto Rican youth entered a national and worldwide movement that said, in no uncertain terms, the status quo must change. Inspired by liberation struggles worldwide, in the United States, and in Puerto Rico, the Young Lords militantly and proudly stood up for the Puerto Rican community. It was a stand against economic exploitation, social injustice, and colonial dependency that resonated throughout the communities in the United States. It was a call for revolution!

The Young Lords said, "We're tired of injustice, and we're not going to take it lying down." That was the first step toward a very simple, popular appeal, reflected in the garbage offensive. The squalor of the barrio was the most visible and physical manifestation of oppression and neglect. Streets overflowed with garbage because the people of *El Barrio* were not a high priority for New York City sanitation services. When the Young Lords swept the streets and set fire to the garbage throughout the summer of 1969, they pressured the sanitation department to clean up the barrio streets. From East 110th Street, the garbage offensive spread to other blocks in the neighborhood and established the Young Lords as street fighters willing to confront the police and government authority to get results.

On another level, we reclaimed our identity, our heritage, our place in society. Although we were living in the United States, we declared, "We're Puerto Rican and proud." We were now here in mass numbers, and our generation asked, "Where do we go next? Our mothers have worked in sweatshops; our fathers have been dish washers. We want better jobs and doors opened to quality educational opportunities." We were trying to figure out our situation without too many role models.

SERVE THE PEOPLE: THE BASIC IDEOLOGY

In the fall of 1969, the Young Lords began to work with welfare mothers and expanded activities to provide free breakfast for children and free clothing programs. As the programs grew, they required more space. Looking around *El Barrio*, the Young Lords assumed that the local churches would want to help. Since the First Spanish Methodist Church on 111th Street was not used during the week, the Young Lords approached the pastor requesting space. Not knowing that the reverend was a Cuban refugee, the Young Lords tried to convince him to open the basement facilities for the free breakfast program. He adamantly refused. One Sunday, the Lords went to church to address the congregation directly. When they got up to speak, a signal was given to the police, who were stationed throughout the church. Bedlam broke out as police attacked, beat, and arrested members. The incident gained strong media attention—"Young Puerto Ricans ask Church for Food Program for Children. Thirteen Arrested" read the headlines.

About three weeks later, the Young Lords occupied the church, named it the People's Church, and set up "serve the people" programs. We ran free breakfast and clothing programs, provided health services and community dinners, set up a liberation school, and on New Year's Eve held a revolution-ary service to herald the "People's Decade." We proved that programs to serve the barrio community were possible when there was political will. Thousands of people passed through the doors of the People's Church, attracted by the spirit and clarity of purpose. We explained our programs and recruited hundreds of supporters. But the church's pastor continued to deny the use of space. The Central Committee of the YLO negotiated with the police, and at the end of eleven days, the police moved in. They arrested 106 Young Lords and supporters who, with raised fists and singing "*Que Bonita Bandera*," filed out of the church into the waiting police wagons.

Puerto Ricans watched closely. Some were frightened by the militant rhetoric, but the Young Lords won the hearts of the barrio community. The People's Church drew national media attention to the miserable living conditions of the Puerto Rican people in this country. It became a political landmark proclaiming the dissatisfaction of the growing Puerto Rican population in the United States. A new generation of young Latinos and Latinas challenged the system, boldly demanded respect, and popularized the idea of "serve the people."

THE MEMBERS WERE THE STRENGTH OF THE ORGANIZATION

The militant spirit and commitment to work directly in the community attracted many of the best organizers. Activists who had participated in the Civil Rights, Black liberation and cultural Nationalists movements joined. Others were community organizers with experience fighting for education, jobs, housing, and health issues. Some united from the student protest movements including the Columbia University and City College takeovers.

We were convinced that we could make the world a better place for all of humanity. After all, the richest country in the world had resources to provide food, clothing, housing, and health care for everyone. It was unconscionable to have so few with so much and so many people with so little. We believed that the most disenfranchised segment of our community, the

most oppressed—the street people—would play a revolutionary role because they had nothing to lose. For us, "community" included these people, who today are considered part of the "underclass." We identified completely with the most oppressed sectors because we came from those sectors.

The Young Lords had popular appeal because the issues that we were talking about were issues that we had lived. Most members were Puerto Ricans born and/or raised in the United States in working-class and Spanish-speaking homes. The majority had attended U.S. public schools and were very familiar with other U.S. institutions. Young African Americans also joined and made up about 25 percent of the membership. Other Latinos—Cubans, Dominicans, Mexicans, Panamanians, and Colombians—also joined. One member was Japanese-Hawaiian. Young Lords were veterans of the street fights in the 1950s, former prison inmates, recovering heroin addicts and alcoholics. We were college students and high-school youth no longer in school. Young Lords were also young factory and hospital workers and mothers. Some were veterans from Puerto Rico and the United States who had fought in Vietnam. The Young Lords were committed men and women in their late teens and early twenties who had experienced racism and exploitation in the United States. We learned to work together and developed bonds that have lasted a lifetime.

The strength of the Young Lords Organization was in transcending our differences and understanding the power of collective action. The Young Lords raised consciousness through bold public actions that focused on the exploitation suffered by our community. Even those who disagreed with our tactics had to agree the injustices we pointed to were clear. The Lords' Information Ministry skillfully used the mainstream media to get our message out beyond our communities and across the United States. Through the *Palante* newspaper, first published in 1970, and the "Palante" radio program on WBAI, young Latinos and Latinas also discussed the major political events of the day—not just those taking place in the local community but about national and international current events as well.

The organization touched people of conscience in our community. Not many organizations do that. Often people vehemently disagreed with the Young Lords. Today we could identify a dozen organizations that have put out position papers on this or that. Who knows, who cares? The Young Lords engaged a generation, and from that a movement and people were inspired to do other things. That was a tremendous contribution.

PEOPLE'S HEALTH: A POLITICAL PRIORITY

People's health was a political priority for the Young Lords right from the beginning. "How can children go hungry in the richest country in the world? Children cannot learn in school if they do not have breakfast," we said. The breakfast program was about the nutrition of children, about having a healthy body in order to have a healthy mind. Subsequently, the Young Lords created a comprehensive health program advocating for preventive care and developing innovative programs around drug addiction, lead poisoning, tuberculosis, and anemia.

Every Saturday, Young Lords, accompanied by a group of medical students, went knocking door-to-door talking to families and collecting urine

samples from their children. The testing exposed the high incidence of lead poisoning in our community. Landlords used cheap lead-based paint for tenement walls, and young children unknowingly put the chipping paint in their mouths and suffered brain damage. Journalists wrote about it, and officials passed legislation requiring the removal of the paint.

Similarly, the Young Lords exposed high levels of tuberculosis when conducting door-to-door testing in the Bronx³ and *El Barrio*. We tried to get city administrators to bring a tuberculosis detection X-ray truck into our communities, but they refused. One day in June 1970, we liberated the X-ray truck, named it the "Ramón Emeterio Betances⁴ Free X-ray Truck," and brought it into East Harlem. The driver and technician stayed in the truck and helped us take X-rays. Over the next three days, we tested hundreds of people.

We believed that institutions in a community have a responsibility to that community. Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx was a dilapidated building that had been condemned twenty-five years earlier. The community called it the "butcher shop." Although the city kept promising a new facility, they never got to its construction. With the Health Revolutionary Unity Movement (a group of hospital workers, doctors, and community members), the Young Lords rallied for community-worker control of Lincoln and formed the Think Lincoln committee. When a young Puerto Rican woman, Carmen Rodríguez, died from a botched abortion, the Young Lords organized protests that brought attention to the deplorable hospital care for Puerto Rican and African American women.

In July 1970, the Young Lords occupied Lincoln Hospital for one day. The demands to the hospital included immediate funding to build a new hospital; door-to-door preventive health programs in the community; no personnel cutbacks, and child care for workers and patients. A second Lincoln Hospital takeover took place later that year, and fifteen people were arrested. It resulted in the hospital administrators agreeing to the creation of the Lincoln Detox Program, which would serve hundreds of people addicted to heroin. We believed in community control of institutions; and in spite of the personalities and big egos, we understood the importance of collective action. In 1976, the city built the Lincoln Hospital that now stands at 149th Street in the South Bronx.

FREE PUERTO RICO NOW!

While working in local communities, we raised consciousness about the United States' colonial domination and exploitation of Puerto Rico. Uniting with the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, El Comité, the Puerto Rican Student Union and other groups, we made sure that the colonial status of Puerto Rico got on the agenda of progressive movements across the United States. In 1970, the Young Lords and the Puerto Rican Student Union organized a student conference at Columbia University specifically to create "Free Puerto Rico Now!" committees in every school and college campus. A thousand students from throughout the major northeastern cities attended. As

3. A New York City borough north of Manhattan.

4. See p. 228.

a result of that work, we also mobilized ten thousand people in 1970 to march to the United Nations calling for the liberation of Puerto Rico and an end to police brutality.

PRISONERS' RIGHTS

Also, from the beginning, the Young Lords made a commitment to work with brothers and sisters in prison. We communicated regularly with Latinos in prisons who wrote us describing inhumane living conditions, and we set up the Inmates' Liberation Front. More than once, brothers showed up straight out of jail to the Young Lords office "reporting for duty."

When the Attica rebellion took place in 1971, the inmates specifically requested that the Young Lords participate as one of the prisoners' representatives negotiating with authorities.⁵ A former Attica inmate, José "G. I." Paris, and seventeen-year-old Central Committee member Juan "Fi" Ortiz represented the organization in the historic negotiations. With other progressive organizations, the Young Lords organized support demonstrations in communities throughout the city.

Young Lords also participated in organized campaigns to free political prisoners Martin Sostre, Eduardo Pancho Cruz, Carlos Feliciano, the five Nationalist prisoners, and the Black Panthers.

WOMEN'S LIBERATION

The Young Lords Organization raised consciousness about feminism and women's rights. The initial Central Committee was all-male, including Felipe Luciano as chairman, David Pérez as minister of defense, Juan González as minister of education, Pablo "Yoruba" Guzmán as minister of information, and Juan "Fi" Ortiz as minister of finance. With the consent of the Central Committee, women members organized a caucus to discuss "women's issues" and study the thirteen-point program of the organization.

To us, point thirteen, "We want a socialist society," meant the liberation of both women and men. As we met and talked, our indignation at our second-class status grew. We worked just as hard as the men; we also put our lives on the line, and we wanted our voices as women reflected in the ideology and activities of the organization. The Young Lords would have to concretely address the oppression of Latinas and machismo. We prepared a list of demands that were presented to the Central Committee.

First, we wanted women represented in the top leadership. The Central Committee appointed Denise Oliver as the first woman to the Central Committee in 1969; with her participation, we gained a strong feminist advocate in the leadership. A year later the Central Committee added another woman, Gloria Fontáñez, to the top leadership. We also wanted all other leadership levels and all ministries to include women. The Central Committee responded by appointing women to the national and central staffs and to the defense ministry. Some brothers said, "The women are not as politically developed

5. In September 1971, almost half of the prisoners at the Attica Correctional Facility, in Attica, New York, rioted and seized control of the prison. For four days, authorities negotiated with the prisoners over demands for better living

conditions. When negotiations failed, state police regained control of the prison. Among the 39 people killed were prisoners, correction officers, and civilian employees.

as the men." Our response was, "Women will develop within struggle. Put women in leadership."

We also demanded that the thirteen-point program and platform of the Young Lords be changed. Point ten read, "Machismo must be revolutionary and not oppressive." We responded that machismo could never be revolutionary. That is like saying, "Let's have revolutionary racism." It is a contradiction in terms. The Central Committee rewrote point ten and moved its position to number five. It said, "We want equality for women. Down with machismo and male chauvinism." This point was the only change that the Young Lords ever made to the program.

The Young Lord women won an important victory. However, we knew that it was not enough to say, "We want equality for women." We were not interested in just a paper victory. Significantly, the Central Committee agreed that machismo or abuses of women would be grounds for discipline, suspension from leadership, or even expulsion from the organization. Most of the leaders were disciplined or suspended for machismo at one time or another.

Accountability was extremely important because many organizations practiced only lip service when it came to feminist ideas. We insisted on child care so that women could attend meetings and be politically involved in the movement. It is still the case, and it most definitely was then, that women are the primary child-care providers.

We insisted that every issue of the *Pa'lante* newspaper reflect the struggles of women and include articles written by women. Women wrote articles about women's oppression and machismo, about workers' struggles in hospitals and factories. We also wrote an initial article exposing the mass sterilization of Puerto Rican women. We reported on a conference in Canada, which we attended to express solidarity with the women of Vietnam.

With these principles in place, more women joined the organization. The internal struggle strengthened the participation of women and gave voice to Latinas across the movement. We considered ourselves feminists but distinct from the White women's liberation movement, which believed that men were the principal enemy. We were critical of that movement for purporting to speak for all women when it represented primarily White, middle-class women. It never successfully addressed the concerns of women of color and poor women. In fact over time, the demand for affirmative action in some industries became synonymous with creating job opportunities for White women but leaving people of color behind.

We organized the Woman's Union, a mass organization for Latinas, working directly around women's issues, such as child-care and health concerns. In *El Barrio*, the union tried to establish a much-needed childcare center, but the project got mired in New York City regulations and bureaucracy. The Women's Union published its own newspaper, *La Luchadora*. It wrote about the three levels of oppression faced by Latinas—as women, as workers, and as Latinas. The paper reached out to all Latinas—homemakers, factory and hospital workers, students, and also women who made a living on the streets as prostitutes. *La Luchadora* also provided information and took positions on such critical health issues as the need for birth control information, the right to an abortion, and the battle against the forced sterilization of women. The Woman's Union held meetings and conducted political education classes and activities with Latinas throughout communities

and schools and led the way for other Latina organizations that subsequently developed.

DEALING WITH INTERNALIZED RACISM

The Young Lords believed that to create a new society, we had to deal with internal contradictions among the people, such as domination based on gender or race. The organization unmasked and exposed the existing racism among Puerto Ricans and Latinos. There was much denial about the existence of racism in Puerto Rico, even in the independence movement. Yet examining the economic and social structure of Puerto Rico or Latin America showed that White, European descendants held the upper positions of power and privilege. Further, they excluded and systematically exploited people of African and indigenous descent.

The Young Lords also challenged the hypocrisy in our culture that accepted the racist ideology inherent in such sayings as "*hay que mejorar la raza*" ("to better the race") and "*pelo bueno, pelo malo*" ("good hair, bad hair"). The organization opposed white supremacy and cultural genocide—the devaluation and destruction of our culture. Instead we celebrated our African ancestry and culture; members wore large Afros, and some assumed African names. We fought "colonized mentality," the psyche of inferiority resulting from U.S. colonial domination of Puerto Ricans and consistently presented these ideas in the *Pa'lante* newspaper and other publications, such as the pamphlet entitled "The Ideology of the Young Lords."

YOUNG LORDS OUTSIDE NEW YORK

Outside New York, Latinos and Latinas were inspired by the ideology and actions of the Young Lords and sought to connect with the organization. Defense Minister David Pérez was in charge of visiting interested groups. He traveled to other cities, assessed the groups' work, conducted political education classes, and developed relationships. In this way, the organization established solid branches in Newark, Philadelphia, and Bridgeport and developed close political ties with groups in Boston, New Haven, Jersey City, Hoboken, Cleveland, Detroit, and other cities. The branches followed the thirteen-point program, conducted "serve the people" programs, and organized at the community level for Puerto Rican/Latino concerns in their city. They all faced direct police harassment, firebombings, and repression—often more severe than what was experienced in New York.

SHORTCOMINGS AND WEAKNESSES

Youthfulness

Though the youthfulness of the organization was a strength, it was also a major limitation. Certain mistakes made by the Young Lords were simply the result of lack of life experience and perspective. Also, with initial successes and growing recognition, a youthful arrogance and failure to understand organizational vulnerabilities developed. Accordingly, destructive forces were able to capitalize on this lack of experience and maturity.

The organization's rules of discipline required that members work "twenty-five hours a day, eight days a week." Membership on this basis could not be sustained over the long term. Because of the full-time commitment, people with full-time jobs and/or families could not easily participate. Therefore, the membership base remained primarily youth, students, and the unemployed. Yet, the organization paid little attention to personal development issues of the youth members, such as getting a formal education or job, developing relationships, childbearing, and parenting.

Centralism and Democracy

A more serious problem had to do with a faulty decision-making process, and this was related to our militarist structure. We followed the theory of "democratic centralism," attempting to balance centralized decision-making with democratic participation by the membership. Centralism was necessary to discuss the strategy and tactics involved in various takeover actions and activities that required maximum security and trust. However, at other times there was little democracy. In practice, the Central Committee made all decisions and set the direction of the organization. The first leaders founded the organization, and they decided who else would join leadership. There were no elections. Emphasis on strict adherence to Central Committee directives frequently stifled member creativity and initiative. Charismatic leadership sustained the organization initially but not over the long term.

At different points in the organization's history and as early as 1970, there were various internal crises expressed as conflict against a particular leader or the struggle for the inclusion of women. These were really part of a broader struggle to democratize the organization, to have members' voices and by extension, the community, really heard in the decision-making process.

Unfortunately, the organization never achieved a balance between democracy, individual freedom, and collective accountability. As the organization evolved from the Young Lords to the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization in 1972, there was a deceiving appearance of democracy; but the opposite was true. There was a total lack of democracy. A few individuals decided and established the politics of the organization expecting all members to follow.

When members raised differences of opinion with ideology or tactics or leaders, they were often subjected to name-calling and labeled "opportunists." The Central Committee even falsely accused some members of being police agents. During the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers' phase, the ruling group maintained control by accusing everyone who disagreed with them of being agents and collaborators. The accusations lost credibility and allowed real agents to continue to operate in the movement unexposed.

The Move to Puerto Rico

The Young Lords sought to define the relationship between Puerto Ricans in the United States and Puerto Rico. Initially, the Young Lords promoted the "Divided Nation" theory. This was the position that Puerto Rico was a divided nation with one-third of Puerto Ricans living in the United States and two-thirds living in Puerto Rico. From that position flowed several

political consequences. Among them was the decision that the primary struggle of Puerto Ricans in the United States was the liberation of Puerto Rico. In March 1971, the Young Lords launched "*Ofensiva Rompecadenas*" ("Break-the-Chains Offensive") directing resources and attention to Puerto Rico. The U.S. branches were considered the base area necessary to keep the Puerto Rico branches in El Caño and in Aguadilla operating. The military slogan was, "Prepare the base, to defend the front."

As "*Ofensiva Rompecadenas*" unfolded, members both in Puerto Rico and the United States questioned the expansion. In April 1972, all the members in the Aguadilla branch resigned and the Central Committee accused them of factionalism. In the United States, many of us concerned about the decreasing attention to local community organizing activities were at a loss about what to do. When Minister of Information Pablo Guzmán, after returning from a trip to China, wrote a paper outlining how to get the organization back on track, we supported it. The paper argued that the move to Puerto Rico was a mistake and that we had to get back to organizing poor and working Latinos in the United States. It rejected the divided nation theory, concluding that Puerto Ricans in the United States are an "oppressed national minority" and that Puerto Rico is the nation. Several Central Committee members and some national staff members, such as Richie Pérez and myself, supported the paper, and we all agreed to launch a rectification movement. We were excited about the possibility of revitalizing the organization and took advantage of the fact that the Central Committee members who would object were out of town. When they returned to New York, they were furious.

After a critical meeting, the Central Committee adopted the position paper. However, they also agreed to discipline the supporters of the rectification movement for "violating democratic centralism." As a result, some of us were sent to branches outside New York, a move to divide the dissenting group. That is how I got to Philadelphia in 1972.

The move to Puerto Rico was a disaster for the organization and the biggest mistake it ever made. The group lost its relationship to the Puerto Rican community in the United States. Simultaneously, the organization became increasingly dogmatic as members spent most of their days in endless debates about Marxist-Leninist-Maoist philosophy. Isolated from reality of the Puerto Rican/Latino community, the organization became irrelevant.

Leaving the Organization

I resigned from the Central Committee of the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization in 1975. By then it had disintegrated into a small group run by Gloria Fontañez, a self-proclaimed "proletarian leader." She surrounded herself with an unthinking clique who did her bidding, including intimidation and violence against those members who disagreed with her.

I was back in New York after having spent two years in Philadelphia. As part of the branch there, I first worked as a sewing-machine operator in several men's clothing factories. Later I was a hospital worker and organizer. Gloria Rodríguez, a dedicated organizer from New York, was also a leader of the branch. Most of the brothers were from the North Philly streets. Although the branch was in decline by 1972, we organized against the ram-

pant police brutality and racism for which Philly and so many other urban cities are well known. We united with other groups, especially the Black Panther Party and I Wor Kuen, an organization of Chinese-American activists. We produced a newsletter, *Abuso*, and organized students at Temple University and women in the community.

The year in New York before I resigned, there was little community work taking place, no "serve the people" programs, no more door-to-door health testing, no community education classes, no more Women's Union. Most of the early Central Committee members were gone. Membership had dwindled. A few organizers were abandoned in factories and other workplaces. The passion, commitment, and hard work of the Young Lords was replaced with ideological squabbling. I was totally demoralized. The organization I joined five years earlier was dead.

The Role of Government Repression

COINTELPRO, the FBI's counterintelligence program, was set up to destroy the African American liberation movement, the Black Panther Party, and progressive organizations, such as the Young Lords. Police agents within the organization worked to intensify the differences and natural contradictions that existed among us. Using Nationalism and disagreements about political strategies, they sharpened divisions and created factions. Intimidation tactics and beatings silenced opposition. They replicated this scenario across the United States.

The U.S. government's surveillance and repression against the independence movement started with the invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898. For decades after, the government launched jailings and massacres of proindependence activists, including the Nationalist Party and its leader, Don Pedro Albizu Campos.⁶ As the Puerto Rican community grew in the United States, the government extended its repressive activities to activists living in the United States. In 1960, the New York FBI field office circulated a memo to its San Juan and Washington, D.C., offices instructing agents to initiate a counterintelligence program against proindependence activists in New York. The FBI's articulated goals were clear: Create disruption and discord, demoralize activists, and cause defections from the movement. The explicit strategy was to exploit factionalism—a fault that they identified as endemic within proindependence groups. Those marching orders were given to FBI agents who also played that role within the Young Lords. Unfortunately, the full story of police and government involvement within the Puerto Rican movement in the United States has yet to be told and documented.

PUERTO RICO'S FUTURE

In 1998, the United States marks one hundred years of colonial domination of Puerto Rico. I continue to believe that Puerto Rico should be independent, a free country, and I support the right of the Puerto Rican people to self-determination. Within the United States, we have a special responsibility to continue to struggle for Puerto Rico's independence and for the

6. See p. 445.

freedom of political prisoners who are still in prisons for fighting for a free Puerto Rico.

Models of Leadership

Not everyone who commits to progressive movements as a young person necessarily sustains commitment for a lifetime. Leadership is determined by practice, by what a person does. Many leaders separate their politics from their personal lives. Yet politics has to translate into one's life in order to truly transform society. "Leaders" who work with youth and who have children must provide for them—financially, emotionally, and with time spent with their children. Leaders have to set an example.

We must reevaluate our notions of leadership. Unfortunately, today's ideas of leadership are still quite patriarchal and elitist. The definition of a leader is still the lone charismatic male heading a hierarchal organization. Collective leadership models to include working people, women, youth, gays, and those who are most marginalized need to be developed.

MAKING THE DOCUMENTARY

PALANTE, SIEMPRE PALANTE! THE YOUNG LORDS

In 1988, a group of former Young Lords met. Some of us had not seen each other since the disintegration of the organization in the mid-seventies. As we reflected on our experience, we expressed concerns about what we saw happening with Latino and Latina youth—the internal violence, the deep sense of hopelessness, and the lack of purpose. We talked about how important the study of our history had been to our development and planned various activities to connect with young people. I volunteered to work on a committee to produce a video about the Young Lords experience, and as often happens, I inherited the project.

The initial work consisted of proposal writing. Fund raising was difficult because grant makers were not interested in political projects or Latino/Latina history. Also I was committed to telling the Young Lords' story the way that we experienced it. History books are generally written by those in power, and I knew it was important that we be the protagonists of this story. As I conducted interviews with former members, I looked for consensus about facts, beliefs, activities, and lessons learned. This approach made fund raising more difficult because many funders wanted a traditional "objective" documentary with the expert outsider commentary.

Over a six year period, the project received research and production grants from the New York State Council for the Humanities, the Paul Robeson Fund, and the Aaron Diamond Foundation. In 1996, POV/*Point of View*, the public television documentary series, granted funds and technical assistance to complete the project and set a broadcast date.

An important funding source was the Latino/Latina youth community. For more than two years, I screened and presented a work-in-progress to student and community groups. Those presentations gave me the opportunity to engage in discussions with Latino/Latina youth across the United States, and the feedback was invaluable to the finished work. Also many young activists

joined me to complete the project doing everything from research to original music. Among them Vanessa Roman continues as the distribution coordinator of the documentary. Through these exchanges, we successfully established relationships with the documentary's intended audience.

In the fall of 1996, *¡PALANTE, SIEMPRE PALANTE! The Young Lords* was broadcast nationally on public television. That night, 750 people gathered together to watch the broadcast and celebrated the screening with poetry, hip hop and *bomba* music, and *plena* performances at the Borough of Manhattan Community College in New York.

DIALOGING WITH TODAY'S YOUTH

History and Identity

Young Latinos and Latinas today face a complicated world of poverty, single-parent homes, segregated and low-quality public schools, drugs, violence, prison, and lack of jobs. They have grown up familiar with AIDS, homelessness, police brutality, and the criminalization of Latino/Latina and African American youth. Subjects of a fast-paced, highly consumer-oriented society, they buy and wear fashion styles that advertise the logos of companies that often do not employ people of color. Increasing numbers of Latino/Latina youth struggle to hold down jobs while attending college, knowing an education is important to a future in a globalized economy. Latino and Latina young people are major consumers of television and film, yet they rarely find positive representations. The Latino/Latina community continues to be marginalized.

A cultural and political renaissance is happening among Latino/Latina youth, and they are engaged in renewed interest and exploration. Young Latinos and Latinas are seeking information about history and the role that Latinos have played in this country. Books are still scarce; videos are almost nonexistent. Youth are also interested in the activism of Latinos in the 1960s and 1970s. The Young Lords experience, especially the early period—very dramatic, militant, defiant—is appealing to young people who are rebellious.

Young Latino/Latinas are struggling with issues of identity, class, and race. Second-, third-, and fourth-generation Puerto Ricans in the United States, many who do not speak Spanish, ask, "Am I Puerto Rican? Am I American?" When one parent is Puerto Rican and the other African American or Dominican or Irish, they ask, "Where do I belong?"

There are questions that interface with class. In the 1960s, we were primarily working class, all of us. Today the children of a middle-class sector ask, "Am I really Puerto Rican? My parents are Puerto Rican. We ate rice and beans, but we were not poor," assuming that to be Puerto Rican or Latino means only to be economically disadvantaged.

Latino and Latina youth are insecure about the future. Will there be jobs? Many are setting up small businesses for economic survival, others because they want creative independence. Health and environmental concerns also raise the level of insecurity about the future.

Color issues persist. A portion of the documentary addresses the struggle against racism within the Latino community, and it resonates deeply with

youth who experience racism as a continuing major internal problem. Studying our African ancestry and promoting our culture is very important to young Latinos and Latinas.

Latino/Latina youth are also grappling with what it means to be Latino as the community grows to include people from all Latin America and the Caribbean. Young people struggle with maintaining national identity while simultaneously developing Latino unity. There are bonds of affinity as well as tension and conflict. Clearly, we need varied organizational forms and multiple tactics to build a mass Latino movement for social and economic justice.

Finally, young people ask many questions about what motivated individuals or what motivated a generation to take the actions taken in the 1960s and 1970s. Of course the related question is, how to motivate people to take political action today.

BUILDING LENS: THE LATINO/LATINA EDUCATION NETWORK SERVICE

¡PALANTE, SIEMPRE PALANTE! The Young Lords led to the creation of LENS—the Latino/Latina Education Network Service, a nonprofit organization that owns and distributes the documentary throughout the United States. It has been enthusiastically received by youth, community organizations, and educational institutions. The reception confirms the importance that young people assign to documenting our history and disseminating our stories.

LENS is dedicated to using the visual medium as a positive way to open dialogues about social and political issues. With *¡PALANTE, SIEMPRE PALANTE!* as an educational and outreach tool, LENS works directly with Latino and Latina youth. The focus is to motivate young people to develop their talents for social justice and community empowerment.

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

I am pleased to see the resurgence of activism and organization-building that is underway in our community. We have to use our knowledge and resources to continue to struggle for economic, political, and social justice. We need to organize for universal health care, food, clothing, and shelter for everyone, for quality education and jobs. We have to create conditions to allow the full artistic, spiritual, and intellectual development of all of us. Learning from our past to continue toward the liberation of humanity, our struggle continues.

1996