

Firsthand report by Juan Mari Bras on the Puerto Rican independence fight

By DERRICK MORRISON

NEW YORK—"The government has tried to put the people to panic. But all of the rallies and demonstrations after March 11 demonstrate that the people are alert." So affirmed Juan Mari Bras, secretary-general of the Movimiento Pro Independencia de Puerto Rico (Pro-Independence Movement of Puerto Rico, MPI), in a March 19 interview with *The Militant*.

Mari Bras, in New York to relate the most recent attacks on the independence movement in Puerto Rico, talked at length about the March 11 events at the University of Puerto Rico and forthcoming activities of MPI.

He picked up the March 21 *Claridad*, weekly organ of MPI, and pointed to the pictures of armed ROTC cadets and police on the Rio Piedras campus of UPR. Mari Bras said the pictures gave the lie to the government's claim that the police initially entered the campus unarmed and that the cadets had no weapons.

The police invasion grew out of an attack by ROTC cadets on pro-independence students in the campus cafeteria. The subsequent clash left two police and a ROTC cadet dead, with hundreds wounded.

Severe limitations had been placed on ROTC ever since last spring when the majority of students voted for the removal of the program. The administration—obviously concerned about the needs of U. S. imperialism—did not consider the vote binding, but moved to restrict all ROTC functions to the military building. Thus, there were no marches, drills, or any other manifestation of training on the Rio Piedras campus. And according to Mari Bras, there are no more than 100 cadets out of a campus population of 26,000. At other UPR campuses on the island, the struggle is

just beginning for the removal of ROTC.

The campaign against ROTC is closely tied to the struggle against the draft. Last Sept. 23, over a thousand draft cards were publicly burned. This grew out of prior mass antidraft mobilizations organized by MPI and other pro-independence organizations. Just nine months before the burning, Edwin Feliciano Grafals, an MPI activist whose case of draft refusal was the first to come to court, was given a reduced sentence of one hour in prison by a Puerto Rican federal judge sympathetic to the independence movement. Since then, says Mari Bras, "Not one Puerto Rican youngster has been brought to court for refusing the draft!"

Mari Bras put special emphasis on the upcoming May Day celebration, part of what MPI proclaims as the "Year of the organization of workers." This event is being organized by MPI through a united-front formation called the Movimiento Accion Sindical (Trade Union Action Movement, MAS). MPI has begun to organize workers—inside and outside the trade unions—into the independence movement.

In respect to the island of Culebra, where the U. S. Navy uses one-third of the land for target practice by its ships and planes, Mari Bras said, "MPI has an active brigade organizing the people there." This is in preparation for the June naval maneuvers. During Navy maneuvers last January, pro-independence forces conducted demonstrations in the target zone. This had a very dampening effect on naval operations. The Culebrans are demanding the expulsion of all operations. The coupling of this demand to the movement for independence has put the Navy on the defensive.

Right now Mari Bras is trying to



Photo from Claridad

Cops attack Rio Piedras campus of the University of Puerto Rico March 11.

raise funds for the students arrested on March 11. Contributions can be sent to: Casa Puerto Rico, 106 E. 14th St., New York, N.Y. 10003.

In addition to the students arrested and beaten on March 11, an ominous incident occurred when police and undercover agents brutally assaulted a Puerto Rican lawyer who had come to the police station to try and help the students.

The lawyer, Roberto Jose Maldonado, was told of students being beaten by the police. As he related in an interview in *Claridad*, "I went in person to the place where I witnessed students being beaten with sticks, pipes and

switches. Their screams could be heard in the distance."

When he asked about the students, he was told to leave. Upon his refusal to do so, Maldonado was set upon by police and undercover agents. He doesn't know how long the beating lasted because he was knocked unconscious at one point. But he does remember groups of police arguing over whether to kill him right then and there.

As a result of the beating, Maldonado is temporarily paralyzed in both legs and has dizzy spells. He is going to bring charges against the police, and a group of lawyers are demanding that the bar investigate the assault.

Struggle of Argentine workers

Repression of protests during a one-day general strike in Córdoba, Argentina, March 12 touched off a new explosion in the industrial city which in May 1969 was the scene of a massive workers uprising. The first Córdoba rebellion was the high point of popular unrest that led ultimately to the removal on June 9, 1970, of General Juan Onganía, who had been designated president by the military.

The recent social explosion in this city induced the military to remove Onganía's successor, General Levingston, after only nine months in office. The third military dictator in a period of one year, General Alejandro Agustín Lanusse, moved quickly to try to conciliate the restive Argentine masses. On assuming governmental power March 23, the junta headed by Lanusse ended the state of emergency in Córdoba proclaimed by the Levingston regime and abolished the 19-percent wage-increase ceiling set by Levingston.

The ousted regime's attempt to impose wage controls despite a galloping inflation (20 percent last year and 10 percent for the first two months of 1971) was apparently one of the primary causes of the Córdoba upsurge. But the political incompetence of the military government seems to have been a strong contributing factor.

The April 3 *New York Times* reported that the Lanusse government

has also moved to legalize the activity of political parties, for the first time since 1966. It was not clear, however, whether this decree would include the legalization of left-wing parties.

The uprising leading to the coup started March 9 when trade unions began preparations for a one-day general strike protesting the appointment of a hated reactionary, José Camilo Uriburu, as commissioner of the city of Córdoba. Other issues of the general strike included demands for general wage increases and support for the struggle of civil service workers in the province.

On March 10, the Unión Industrial (Manufacturers' Union) sent a telegram to Levingston appealing to the government to "protect private property" and warning that occupations of factories and stores during the strike could not be tolerated.

Levingston immediately decreed a 15-percent wage rise for civil service workers in the province and at the same time stated that he would use local security forces and, if necessary, the armed forces to quell any "subversive actions and violence."

"As was to be expected," reported the March 16-22 Buenos Aires weekly *Panorama*, "the threat from the central government did not dissuade the rebellious workers. Thus, at 10:00 in the morning of March 12, while the Córdoba police and federal forces stationed themselves along the central

streets . . . more than 130 factories, shops, and big business establishments were occupied by the workers. An unusual development was that public administration employees also blockaded themselves in their offices."

In the suburb of Córdoba called Ferreyra, where the FIAT auto assembly complex is located, an 18-year-old worker, Adolfo Cepeda, was shot to death when the repressive forces stormed barricades erected by the protesters. Several other workers were wounded.

"The death of the young worker," reported *Panorama*, "angered the leaders of SITRAC and SITRAM [unions with a young, independent, left leadership]. Thus, at 3:30 Friday afternoon, as the workers of the second shift at the Grandes Motores Diesel and Concord factories, belonging to the FIAT complex, hurried to work, the activists of these unions stopped them at the gates to inform them of the death of Cepeda and the police attack. The activists did not have to resort to lengthy arguments to keep the workers from going in. By acclamation, after a brief assembly, the majority of workers decided to continue the strike, while the angriest among them joined the activists who built barricades, burned a diesel locomotive and a railway car, and set fire to a half-wrecked truck and hundreds of trees and posts."

On Saturday afternoon, 600 delegates of the Córdoba regional council of the CGT (General Confederation of Labor) met and voted to issue a call for new general strikes March 15 and 17.

Reports in the international press indicate that renewed attempts to suppress the workers movement throughout the week of March 15-19 ignited a massive struggle. An estimated \$4-million worth of property was destroyed in violent clashes between the repressive forces and the protesters. The March 17 issue of the Paris weekly *Le Monde* reported that 60 persons were wounded, 10 of whom were shot, 300 persons were arrested, 50 cars were burned, six banks were attacked with Molotov cocktails, and 50 stores were looted.

At the beginning of April, it was not clear whether formation of the new government had halted the fissuring of the armed forces that produced a climate of rumors of coups and countercoups in the period leading up to the overthrow of Levingston. It seemed likely, however, that after four years of ruling through the military, the bourgeoisie was anxious to return to some kind of parliamentary system where their debates over strategy would not threaten to generate armed conflicts between opposing factions of the repressive forces.