

Ruth Reynolds Remembers 1950

North Americans Must Act to Free Puerto Rico

Ruth Reynolds is a North American who has been actively supporting the independence movement in Puerto Rico for 30 years. Even though that support has led to her imprisonment, she has never wavered. Currently, she is on the Board of Directors of the Committee to Defend Carlos Feliciano and the Committee for Puerto Rican Decolonization. We asked her to write something about how she got involved in the Puerto Rican struggle—her answer is below.

I have always believed in freedom for everyone and for all people. In the late 1930's as World War II approached, I had long been a pacifist. I was very much interested in the strategy and tactics of Mahatma Gandhi for the independence of India, and in the summer of 1941 I decided to join a group in Harlem headed by Jay Holmes Smith who had been expelled from India as a Methodist missionary because he had sided with the Indian people against the British empire. We founded a branch in the developing Puerto Rican community on 113th St. between Fifth and Madison. We continued our great interest in the independence of India and were demonstrating whenever the occasion arose.

We knew nothing about what the U.S. was doing in Puerto Rico until one day a Puerto Rican Baptist Minister named Hipolito Cotto Reyes stopped in our office to ask us about our program. After we explained it we asked him for his comments;

he made some polite remarks. When pressed he finally said that what surprised him was that, though living in a Puerto Rican community, we were extremely concerned about what the British Government was doing in India but seemed to have no similar concern about what the U.S. was doing in Puerto Rico. We asked him to explain and it was in subsequent meetings with Hipolito Cotto Reyes that I first learned of United States action in Puerto Rico and what it meant to the Puerto Rican people.

During this time, many of our young men were being sent to prison for refusing to register for the draft. One evening in the summer of 1943 a friend of ours who had recently returned from prison asked if he could invite a fellow inmate to dinner. Our guest turned out to be Julio Pinto Gandia who was then right-hand man to Don Pedro Albizu Campos, President of the Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico. Through Pinto we became acquainted with Don Pedro Albizu Campos who was hospitalized in New York City for a severe heart ailment contracted in a federal penitentiary. And we became thoroughly convinced that Puerto Rico should be free from the United States.

This conviction led to my participation in the formation of the American League for Puerto Rican Independence in December 1944. I was Executive Secretary. In that capacity I lobbied at the United Nations and participated in Congressional hearings on the Tydings Bill and on the Elective Governor Bill introduced in 1947. We stood for complete independence of

Round-up by National Guard after 1950 Revolution, Ruth Reynolds is third from left.



Puerto Rico and rejected reform measures which we felt were introduced only for the ultimate purpose of keeping Puerto Rico in chains.

In late September of 1948 I was sent to Puerto Rico by the American League to investigate the conflict at the university after students had been clubbed to unconsciousness in the streets of Rio Piedras for demonstrating for Puerto Rico's independence on El Grito de Lares, September 23. In April of 1948 Rector Jaime Benitez, today Commissioner on Puerto Rico in Washington, had closed the university for three weeks after students had marched into his office demanding his resignation because he had refused to allow Don Pedro Albizu Campos to speak on the university campus. When the university re-opened 500 policemen had been assigned to it and remained there until November of 1948. During this period students were not allowed to walk even two together to and from class as the courts were upholding the Rector's position that this constituted "unlawful assembly". Hundreds of students were suspended, and from 1948 until the early 1960's there was no agitation for Puerto Rico's independence on the university campus.

At the close of my investigation it seemed that the report that I was expected to give to the American League should take the form of a book which would explain not only the events which had occurred at the university but also the colonial background out of which they arose. This project kept me in Puerto Rico working on the manuscript for two years, and at the point of publication the 1950 revolution erupted. I was one of hundreds of people arrested and charged with advocating the overthrow of the government by force and violence. I was tried and found guilty, and sentenced to six years. I remained in prison until June of 1952 when I was released on bail pending appeal and finally won the case on appeal in November, 1954.

It may seem incredible that I, a confirmed pacifist, was jailed for advocating the overthrow of the government by force and violence, but anyone who had been in Puerto Rico during that period could understand how it could happen to anyone who sympathized with the independence of Puerto Rico, pacifist or non-pacifist.

When I arrived in September of 1948 I found a situation of increasing tension between the Nationalist Party and the U.S. Government. After Don Pedro Albizu Campos had returned to Puerto Rico in December of 1947 thirty-two detectives were immediately assigned to watch him and to follow and investigate everyone who came to see him. One engineer that I knew was fired from his job because he sent a quart of milk every day from his farm to Don Pedro's home. Wherever Don Pedro went, at least one carload of detectives followed him. And if Don Pedro walked contrary to traffic on San Juan's narrow streets, the police car also went contrary to traffic. At public meetings of the Nationalist Party the provocation was intense but the Nationalists were doing everything in their power to prevent a violent confrontation without abandoning their program of independence from Puerto Rico.

On an international level they had maintained an observer in the United Nations since its beginning in 1945. In the Organization of American States they had succeeded in placing the question of Puerto Rico's independence on the agenda for the 1951 meeting of that organization. They had carried eight draft resistance cases into the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Boston and were planning to appeal to the Supreme Court. In Puerto Rico itself their campaign for non-recognition of the

authority of the U.S. Government and for abstention from participation in colonial elections had been so successful that in 1948 42% of the people of voting age stayed away from the polls, despite the fact that non-voters were considered Nationalists and ran the risk of all kinds of harassment including loss of employment.

I remember so well the day late in April 1950 when newspapers announced the arrival in Puerto Rico of Louis Johnson, Secretary of Defense of the United States. Everywhere in Puerto Rico people were speculating as to why Mr. Johnson had come to Puerto Rico. I went to see Don Pedro to ask him what he thought this visit meant. He told me he didn't know but that he was trying to find out. Within three days he was able to tell me of reports he had received from several different sources: the reason Mr. Johnson had come to Puerto Rico was to order top military officials in Puerto Rico to instruct Gov. Muñoz Marín to order the police to liquidate the Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico. Its leadership was to be arrested, or if this proved impossible, given popular feeling, then assassinated. The Nationalist Party tried to spread the news through the press, but the newspapers refused to print it even as paid advertisement. It was only through public meetings that this plan could be unmasked and denounced.

Tension between Nationalists and police at these public meetings was very high. Nevertheless no serious incident occurred until the police during the last days of October began carrying out orders given by Louis Johnson six months earlier. They first arrested two carloads of Nationalists returning from Fajardo on October 27. I had caught a ride to San Juan in one of the cars and was taken to Police Headquarters but released without charges several hours later. The men in the car who were armed were detained. Two nights later police raided the home of the President of the Nationalist Junta in Ponce but found nothing of interest to them.

Around 1:00 A.M. on October 30 Nationalists in Ponce learned that police had left Ponce for the farm in Peñuelas of the mother of the Nationalist President in Ponce. The Nationalists followed. It was at this farm that fighting broke out between police and Nationalists. News of this reached all Puerto Rico by radio and Nationalists throughout the island realized that the crackdown ordered months earlier had begun. Since the Nationalists considered an attack on any of its members an attack on the entire party they responded with armed revolution throughout Puerto Rico. They proclaimed the Republic of Puerto Rico at Jayuya.

The police and U.S. National Guard, using bombing planes, regained control in Puerto Rico several days later. The repression was terrible. I was arrested on November 2nd. Finding my book and not wanting it published, the authorities knew that they had to jail me on false charges to prevent its publication, since I could not be silenced otherwise.

I don't believe in silence when a people are struggling for their freedom. This background is still virtually unknown to North Americans, who I believe are purposefully kept uninformed about the historical relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico. I think it is crucial that they become informed, and that they take action.

It is my view now, as it had been for 30 years, that it is the obligation of the people of the United States quite as much as the people of Puerto Rico to bring about the freedom of Puerto Rico from the United States. We cannot believe in freedom for ourselves as long as we deny it to any other people.