

# **Palante! A Brief History of the Young Lords**

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It started on a Sunday in the streets on the of El Barrio (East Harlem), New York City, 1969. Piles of rotting trash had been left to decay in the Puerto Rican community, even though the Sanitation Department mover was just up the block. For weeks the people patiently swept up the streets and bagged the trash themselves, waiting for the city to do its job. The community tried every avenue and gave the city every chance to fulfill its most basic functions. But the city bureaucracy didn't respond. Young and old, hospital orderlies, students, and store owners began dragging the trash that had been left rotting in the summer sun into the middle of the street, building barricades four feet high. And to make to sure traffic on Third Ave. wasn't going to move, they set the trash on fire. When the city finally came, it was the NYPD and the Fire Department, not the Sanitation Department. The community greeted them with a hail of rocks, bottles and trash. The Young Lords had been involved in organizing the street cleanup for weeks, and now they were leading the offensive. "The streets. I belong to the people! The moon belongs to people! Power to the people!" the community cried. As the hapless cops tried to drag the smoldering trash away the Young Lords celebrated their first victory, winning the hearts of the Puerto Rican community and the ire of the NYPD.

The New York City Young Lords Organization (later the Young Lords Party), was founded by a group of mostly Puerto Rican students from SUNY-Old Westbury, Queens College and Columbia University. They were inspired by the Black Panther Party (BPP) and a group called the Young Lords in Chicago, Illinois. The Chicago Young Lords were a former street organization that had gained national attention when they took over a local church in order to provide child care, a breakfast program and other community-oriented programs.

## **A Time of Revolutions**

Many of the original Young Lords had been involved in the student and anti-war movements and wanted to apply the skills gained in that work to creating a community-based revolutionary organization. At first they came together and formed a student group called "La Sociedad de Albizu Campos," named after Puerto Rican nationalist Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos. This was more or less a study group that analyzed the issues facing the communities they identified with and the broader implications of their experiences. They decided to focus their energy on the communities in which they had actual roots: the Puerto Rican communities on the Lower East Side and in East Harlem. The Young Lords organized both on campuses and in their communities. They continued to build an autonomous student movement, while at the same time training students to be community organizers. They recognized that the community needed to feel ownership over institutions of higher education, and fought for colleges that served their needs. And the Young Lords realized that building a revolutionary organization means investigating the issues that the community is already struggling with in some way. As revolutionaries they sought to make tangible gains on the issues the community found important. And this was done not simply to win the trust of the community so that they could make "The Revolution," but out of a desire to change the day-to-day conditions of the people in their community. Finally, the Young Lords recognized that building a mass-based revolutionary organization means earning the respect of the community. This respect would only be earned through struggle. The Young Lords also had to establish and prove themselves as a real community organization. which meant that community people were not foot soldiers, but leaders of struggles.

## **A Community on the Margins**

Puerto Ricans living in the barrios of New York, Philadelphia and Chicago in 1969 were a part of the massive migration from Puerto Rico to the US between 1948 and 1958. They came to the US, as citizens, in search of stable jobs and decent housing.

The Spanish landed in Puerto in 1493, where they found a Taino nation with its own complex social, economic and political structure. The Spanish began to import African slaves to the island in the 1500s, in part because of the massive resistance to slavery by the indigenous population. By the end of the century the Tainos were virtually wiped out as a distinct people. The African people were stripped of their social and family structures, and immediately forced into slave labor with other African peoples who spoke different languages—making organizing resistance more difficult. For Spain, Puerto Rico functioned as a launching pad for expanding their plunder and conquest of Latin America.

In 1898 the US invaded Puerto Rico under the auspices of ousting Spanish colonialism. Expecting freedom or at least a better standard of living, Puerto Ricans were instead subjected to even greater forms of racism, cultural marginalization and colonial exploitation. Puerto Rico has been a colony of the US since this time.

## **Tengo Puerto Rico en mi Corazon**

In the barrios of the US, Puerto Rican people suffered severe economic exploitation. There Puerto Ricans faced filthy and dangerous tenement housing and a school system that denigrated their language and culture and offered little opportunity for higher education. In the streets they faced an occupying army, the New York City Police Department, which was openly racist and used violence liberally. Puerto Ricans were good enough to die in the jungle of Vietnam but were treated like the Viet Cong on the streets of New York.

## **Serve the People**

Behind every action of the Young Lords was their method of community-based revolutionary organizing. The Young Lords' first action—to clean the streets of the barrio—was decided after conducting a survey in the community, asking people what they wanted and needed most. The Young Lords understood that the Puerto Rican community's desire for clean streets was connected to a broader set of community concerns, and that by cleaning the streets they could create the momentum needed to sustain a movement. The Young Lords, having established a name for themselves as people who listened and got things done, together with the community, were able to translate a revolutionary vision into a movement for transforming the society from the ground up.

After the garbage campaign, the Young Lords developed a series of successful community projects or serve the people programs in the Puerto Rican community. They held organized breakfast and day care programs for children and did door-to-door lead-poisoning testing. They also seized a local church that was empty six days of the week. The First Spanish Methodist Church was transformed into La Iglesia de la Gente : (The Church of the People), a vibrant community center where local residents gave testimonial speeches, describing their lives in El Barrio.

Music, art and poetry filled the air, as people worked around the clock creating for the Puerto Rican movement. People who had never done anything “political” before began to see themselves as revolutionaries. And revolutionaries who originally thought that they had all the answers because they had read Marx, Che, Fanon or Mao realized that the people understood what was needed because they were already in the struggle. Collectively from pain, desire, isolation, and fighting spirit they were able to develop a plan of action.

Though the church takeover lasted only eleven days, its impact was far-reaching. It brought the Young Lords national attention and won many more young people to the movement. Young Lords chapters cropped up in Hoboken, Newark, Jersey City, New Haven, Connecticut, Philadelphia, and Boston. On the West Coast a similar process was taking place with the rise of the Brown Berets out of the Chicano student movement. These movements also caught the attention of the FBI, which began trying to infiltrate and disrupt the Young Lords. The Young Lords were hit by the FBI and NYPD, as when Julio Roldan was “suicided”-hung in a prison cell after being arrested in a highly peculiar incident in 1970. The Young Lords responded by occupying the People’s Church for a second time, this time armed to the teeth. But while their revolutionary program included armed struggle, the Young Lords’ most far-reaching actions were the serve the people programs.

Health care was one of the basic issues of the Lords. They organized the Health Revolutionary Unity Movement (HRUM), a mass organization which was made up of Puerto Rican and Black medical workers based in Gouverneur Hospital on the Lower East Side and other hospitals in Harlem. The Young Lords did door-to-door TB testing, and when they saw the city had a TB testing truck that somehow never made into the barrio, they “liberated” the truck, and took chest X-rays of hundreds of people in the community.

After a young Puerto Rican woman died from a minor surgical procedure, HRUM took over the old Lincoln Hospital on Nov. 10, 1970. Over 600 people joined HRUM in occupying the Nurses’ Residence in order to publicize the flagrant disregard for human life in New York City hospitals. The occupation was brief, but the press coverage embarrassed the city tremendously. Much of the hospital’s staff, including clerical workers, nurses and doctors, stayed in the hospital in solidarity with HRUM’s demands, adding to the city’s humiliation.

## **The Young Lord’s Political Culture**

The Young Lords also sought to change the consciousness of people in the process of making revolutionary change. With the Young Lords’ cry for revolution many Puerto Rican women began to see the opportunity for new choices outside of the traditional family structure. Women’s liberation was by no means immediately taken up by the Young Lords. Women had to struggle to be heard on equal terms with their male comrades. They criticized the Party’s tacit support of male chauvinism in its ranks and the organization’s stated support for “progressive machismo,” demanding that the Party oppose machismo and support women’s liberation explicitly in their thirteen-point program. It took time, but changes were made. The Young Lords developed a theory of patriarchal gender roles and recognized how historically in national liberation struggles, such as those in Algeria, Cuba and Vietnam, male chauvinist ideas taught colonized men that the only way to regain their identity was to dominate women. These discussions opened up the space for lesbian, gay and transgender members of the party to lead discussions of queer libera-

tion. Sylvia Rivera, a Puerto Rican drag queen who had participated in the Stonewall rebellion, was a member of the Young Lords' Lesbian and Gay Caucus and a founding member of Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR). The Young Lords built alliances with the Gay Liberation Front and the Third World Gay Liberation because, as Young Lord Pablo Guzman said, "they were on the same road we were." This positive response to these newly-emerging movements cannot be underestimated.

What accounted for the Young Lords' openness and flexibility is not clear. However, their conception of racial identities may offer us some insight. In the Young Lords, Puerto Rican identity was not defined narrowly by race. The Young Lords openly embraced and celebrated their Afro-Indio roots. The Lords saw the multi-racial character of Puerto Rican nationality and thought of themselves as a multi-racial organization. Denise Oliver (a Black woman on the Central Committee) described the Young Lords as, "not locked into a very tight cultural definition of who you had to be to be a Young Lord." The Young Lords included Blacks, Cubans, Dominicans and Mexicans. They were committed to confronting anti-Black prejudice in the larger Puerto Rican community.

## **The Lean Years**

By the early 1970s, the massive social movements of the late 1960s began to ebb at the same time the main organizers of many of the movements were coming to revolutionary consciousness. This caused a crisis, as the leaders began to pull out of the mass movements that weren't purely revolutionary and search for a social base that had come to similar conclusions as them. Many well-meaning revolutionary minded people made serious mistakes in this period that we can still learn from today.

In 1971 the Young Lords, experiencing the decline of mass movement activity, began frantically searching for the ideal social base that was ready to make the revolution and internally began a self-destructive process of weeding out anyone who doubted the scientific truth of the organization's leaders. In March of 1971 the Young Lords decided they had to move the organization back to the island of Puerto Rico. After quickly realizing that the Lords were a Nuyorican phenomenon, they returned to the US, causing the first of a succession of bitter splits. The Young Lords then concluded that they needed to drop their community organizing orientation in favor of Marxism's supposedly scientific focus on organizing workers at the point of production. At this point the Young Lords became the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization (PRRWO), an explicitly Marxist-Leninist organization. While many in the organization began to see the necessity of building a specifically-proletarian revolutionary organization that would include Asians, Blacks and white people from other Marxist-Leninist formations, others began to accuse those who didn't agree with the move to the island as not being sufficiently Puerto Rican. Failing to find a perfect revolutionary social base, the Young Lords or PRRWO, disappeared from the public eye completely. Having won some victories at Lincoln Hospital and elsewhere, the PRRWO thought that only by organizing workers at the point of production, where they supposedly have the most social power, could they advance the revolutionary movement. This undermined the Young Lords' appeal towards the actual base that they had already established in the streets and stemmed from a narrow reading of class struggle as it was actually taking place in the barrios in the US. This wooden and mechanical Marxism was a major error of much of the

communist left in the 1970s. It led the majority of the New Left away from campus organizing (historically a hotbed of radical politics and a catalyst of broader social movements) and generally dismissed the feminist, queer liberation, and environmental movements of the 1970s. For many the move toward workplace organizing reflected a genuine attempt to transform the class and racial composition of their revolutionary organizations, which were mainly made up of middle-class college students. But the Young Lords had much deeper roots in working-class, people of color communities than the whiter communist groups. Their shift to point-of-production organizing undermined the revolutionary consciousness they had nurtured in the community where the potential to expand struggle, even in the lean years of the '70s, was far greater than in the factories.

## **Conclusion**

The history and contributions of the Young Lords have been obscured in popular histories of the New Left. In New York among younger activists there has been a growing interest in the lessons they offer us, largely due to the important work of the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights and Iris Morales' new documentary of the Young Lords, *Palante Siempre Palante!*

The Young Lords played an important role in the social movements of the 1960s and '70s. People become convinced that only a total transformation of this society—a revolution—is necessary during the course of struggles around issues that have a direct impact on their lives. This doesn't always or even usually happen spontaneously. It happens when revolutionaries like the Young Lords are consistently working with ordinary people to sum up the lessons of the day-to-day struggle.

Oppression breeds resistance. But resistance doesn't necessarily build movements and organizations sufficient to actually change this society. That requires the deliberate organization of a revolutionary movement. The serve the people programs of the Young Lords and their willingness to learn from regular people in the course of struggle represent principles that revolutionary anarchists should embrace. Their decline into rigid and doctrinaire politics represent a danger for all revolutionaries, and warns us that revolutionary ideas and principles must be tested in the practice of day-to-day struggles if they are to be of any value. In both their strengths and their weaknesses the experiences of the Young Lords show us that there are no short cuts to revolution.

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A short history by Carolyn of the Love and Rage Anarchist Federation about the Young Lords, a  
Puerto Rican gang that developed into a Marxist political organisation.

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