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The New Wave of Repression in Puerto Rico

By Carmelo Ruiz
May 6, 2016

On April 20 the FBI detained Puerto Rican pro-independence activist Orlando González-Claudio. He was driving his car along the Caribbean island nation's Route 2 when several US government vehicles intercepted him and forced him to stop. They told him they would take DNA samples from his body and that they were fully authorized to force him to comply. If he did not cooperate they would sedate him, they said. They would sample his DNA the easy way or the hard way. González-Claudio voluntarily got off his car and entered the FBI vehicle he was led to. He was then handcuffed and driven to the San Juan Medical Center, where the samples were taken. Afterwards he was released and taken back to his car. The agents would not tell him what were they investigating, and he was not charged with anything.

González-Claudio is a member of Los Macheteros, a revolutionary organization that fights for the independence of Puerto Rico by whatever means necessary, including covert action and armed struggle. In August 1985 he was arrested along with a dozen other Macheteros and charged with participating in a heist that took place in a Wells Fargo cash depot in Connecticut in September 1983. \$7.2 million (\$17.2 million in 2016 dollars) were taken from the facility, making it the largest cash robbery in US history at the time. Dubbed Operation Aguila Blanca (White Eagle), the Macheteros took credit for the action and announced the money would be used to fund the political and military activities of the independence movement. There were warrants also for the arrest of two of Orlando's brothers, Avelino and Norberto, but neither could not be found. Both would remain at large for over two decades before being apprehended.

In Orlando's sentencing the court admitted that the Wells Fargo robbery was not motivated by selfish, criminal motives, but that it was a political act to further the cause of Puerto Rican independence. Orlando holds that this is an acknowledgement of historical importance on the part of the US government, for it was admitting that the Macheteros were not common criminals and that their heist was not motivated by personal financial gain. After the 1985 arrests the people of Puerto Rico were able to see, through the press's cameras, that the Macheteros did not spend the Wells Fargo money on luxuries, and that their homes and living conditions were rather modest. The US authorities never recovered a single penny of the money, and to this day do not know for certain where it ended up.

After getting out of jail in 1994 and finishing probation in 2002, Orlando González-Claudio reintegrated himself fully into the independence movement and still proudly identifies himself publicly as a Machetero. He was later jailed again, this time for his participation in the civil disobedience campaign against the US Navy's presence in the island municipality of Vieques, in which over 1,000 other people were also imprisoned.

He currently lives in Vega Baja, where he farms with his wife Rosa Villalonga, who was born and raised in Cuba. Together they run Teatro Campo, a community cultural center that hosts a variety of cultural and patriotic activities, including organic agriculture workshops, poetry recitals, theater, cinema and concerts.

That same week the FBI stopped another Machetero, Juan Segarra-Palmer, and put him through the same process. He was arrested in 1985 along with Orlando, convicted of seditious conspiracy, the Wells Fargo heist and other charges, and sentenced to sixty years in prison. Segarra-Palmer was released through an executive clemency offered to him and other jailed *independentista* fighters by US president Bill Clinton in September 1999. Being deemed more dangerous than the others, he was not released immediately but got a sentence reduction instead. He remained in jail until January 2004.

On Thursday the 21st of April they came for Norberto Cintrón-Fiallo, who was detained while visiting a drug store. Cintrón-Fiallo is a veteran of revolutionary struggles in Puerto Rico and in the Dominican Republic, where he was born and raised. Like the other two, he also an *independentista* who knows prison. In the early 1980's he was jailed twice for refusing to cooperate with two federal grand juries that had been empaneled to investigate two major military operations of the Macheteros. The first of these was a December 1979 attack in which the Macheteros ambushed a bus carrying US Navy personnel in the Sabana Seca sector of the municipality of Toa Baja. They sprayed the vehicle with machine gun fire, killing two of the occupants and wounding another ten.

The Sabana Seca attack was a response to the death the previous month of Angel Rodríguez-Cristóbal, one of the top people at the Puerto Rico Socialist League, who was jailed for civil disobedience in Vieques and taken to prison in the US. One day he was found dead in his cell in Tallahassee federal prison. The authorities said it was a suicide but nobody in the independence movement believed it. It was seen as a reprisal and a warning against Puerto Ricans who advocate independence.

The second grand jury investigated a January 1981 Machetero bombing attack in several warplanes of the Puerto Rico Air National Guard in Muñiz Air Base were destroyed by explosives. No one was killed or hurt in the attack, which the Macheteros named Operation Pitirre. In spite of its name, there is nothing national about this airborne military unit. As is the case with the National Guards of the fifty US states, the PR Air National Guard can be “federalized” and called into service by the president of the United States through executive order. In 1950 its planes strafed and bombed the towns of Utuado and Jayuya during the Nationalist revolt, and in 1954 they provided air cover for the Guatemalan rebels who, with the aid and direction of the US Central Intelligence Agency, overthrew the democratically elected president Jacobo Arbenz.

Arguing that a Puerto Rican *independentista* should never cooperate with US law enforcement in any way, Cintrón-Fiallo defied the two grand juries and went to jail twice for contempt. Other *independentistas* who were summoned to testify, including his brother Federico, also refused to comply and were thus imprisoned too. As a result of this non-cooperation, both grand juries ended up empty handed and unable to issue any indictments.

Norberto Cintrón-Fiallo has had other run-ins with the colonial authorities. In 1981 he was indicted for a bank robbery allegedly carried out by the Macheteros, but his case was dismissed when no witnesses could identify him. And in February 2006 the FBI broke into the apartment where he lives with his wife Liliana Laboy, as well as into the homes of other *independentistas*, searched the place and confiscated computers. No one was arrested or charged, and the FBI never explained what evidence they were after.

To this day, after 35 years, no one has ever been arrested or indicted for the Base Muñiz attack. And with regards to Sabana Seca, the FBI had never made any arrests or apparently had any leads that would stand up in court, until in 2014 Juan Galloza-Acevedo, a Puerto Rican living in New York, was convicted of participating in the attack. He allegedly confessed and gave the prosecution the names of everyone involved. Citing his advanced age and frail health, the court sentenced him to only five years.

The local press reported that the three detentions were the result of an order signed by federal judge José Fusté, which calls for a total of sixteen individuals to have their DNA sampled. The order does not say who are the other thirteen persons to be sampled, and does not say what is the purpose of the investigation. The press also reported that the US Navy’s criminal investigation service (NCIS) is working jointly with the FBI in whatever is being investigated, leading many *independentistas* to believe that the US government is setting up a new grand jury to arrest and indict people for the Sabana Seca attack, with the help of Galloza-Acevedo’s “confession”.

“In recent days the *federales* have increased their customary repression against sectors that struggle against colonialism and exploitation”, denounced the Puerto Rico Socialist Front on the first of May. “These detentions are another example of them doing and undoing as they please. Don’t ever believe that they are trying to do ‘justice’, they use their force to repress us all. Today it’s against certain *independentistas*, but their objective is to submit any person that stands in the way of their plans and profits; remember they mess with public housing projects (*caseríos*) and poor neighborhoods (*barriadas*), never with the rich.”

The idea that the US government's actions are related events in 1979 "is what everyone is speculating about, but we have no way to know for sure", according to Wilma Reverón, spokesperson for the pro-independence organization Movimiento Independentista Nacional Hostosiano (MINH).

"In terms of what is happening, it seems to me an abuse that has no comparison in the history of Puerto Rico. The United States may force a person to submit to DNA testing as something constitutional, but in Puerto Rico our constitution protects the right to privacy. We have no way of knowing if these three comrades are under suspicion of a felony. It is an obscene exercise of force. It's like an urge to oppress and humiliate 'because I can'. We are talking about something that happened in 1979. 37 years have passed. They have supposedly found a person that is cooperating (Galloza-Acevedo)", declared Reverón.

Many *independentistas* suspect that these US government moves also have the purpose of intimidating and undermining popular struggles against neoliberal austerity measures that the government is imposing in response to the wishes of bondholders who want to collect on the island's ballooning \$72 billion public debt.

"On April 6 the PPD (ruling party) passed Law 21, 'Law of Emergency Moratorium and Financial Rehabilitation of Puerto Rico'", explained the Socialist Front. "It grants the governor the kind of powers Spanish military governors had; that law renders the separation of powers ineffective, it reduces the powers of the legislative and judicial branches; provides for jail sentences for anyone who defies it; it does not permit questioning the legality of the governor's actions, and gives Fortaleza (the governor's mansion) the power to control all of the (Puerto Rico) government's budget and to decide how to spend what's left."

In addition to these and other recent measures, the US Congress is considering the imposition of a fiscal control board (*junta*) with absolute powers to force Puerto Rico to pay creditors no matter how, even if it means slashing public funding for health and education or raiding pension funds. The FBI detentions of prominent *independentistas* happen precisely when popular forces-organized labor, student movements, community groups, environmentalists, the left, and others-are stepping up their organizing against the imposition of the *junta* and against other forms of neoliberalism and colonialism.

"We are very concerned that these may be actions to try to intimidate and discourage the people of Puerto Rico, not just the independence movement, because there are diverse sectors that are learning what the fiscal control board is about, that it is a dictatorship legitimized by US law, not by the people of Puerto Rico, and there is talk of organizing the resistance against this *junta*", said attorney Eduardo Villanueva, former president of the Puerto Rico Bar Association and spokesman for the Human Rights Committee.

Villanueva told the *El Nuevo Día* daily newspaper that "the fundamental right, such as the right to association and expression, is violated when state power is used to threaten and intimidate

when these people are searched in front of other people and have samples taken from them without having been accused of anything.”