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Unrest in Puerto Rico

CLAYTON FRITCHEY

San Juan, P.R.

As if the Central Intelligence Agency didn't already have enough trouble with students in the U.S., it has also been accused of inciting attacks here against Puerto Rican students who are campaigning for independence of the island.

Juan Mari Bras, a wealthy lawyer who is secretary-general of the Pro Independence Movement (PIM), charges that the Assn. of University Students for Statehood (AUPE) is really an "instrument" of the CIA, and that AUPE is responsible for a recent rock-throwing assault on other youths demonstrating for independence.

"We do not have the slightest doubt," said Mari Bras, "that in back of all this is the infamous CIA, which has been trying through its San Juan office to attack the PIM and the independence struggle in general."

Senor Mari Bras may not have any "doubts," but most other Puerto Ricans do. His charges against the CIA are not taken seriously, but they have nevertheless served his purpose of attracting attention to the emotional new political struggle that is developing here.

Since this conflict revolves primarily about the island's relations with the U.S., and will probably come to a head later this year through a plebiscite on status, Americans are soon going to be hearing a great deal about it, especially if Mari Bras and his new ally, the one and only Stokely Carmichael, have anything to do with it.

Carmichael, whose leadership of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee so aroused Americans last year, has come and gone from Puerto Rico, but he will be back, and meanwhile he is busy stirring up things in New York, where 700,000 Puerto Ricans now live.

In fact, Carmichael and Mari Bras have issued a joint communique saying they will work together against the war in Vietnam, the draft and "police brutality," and for better housing, education and living conditions in urban slums.

The Independentistas share Castro's view that Puerto Rico is merely a "perfumed colony" of U.S. The PIM and SNCC alliance intends to try to bring questions of Puerto Rican independence and Negro "oppression" in the U.S. before the UN.

All this makes headlines, but here in San Juan interest centers not on the Independentistas (as of now a negligible group), but on the coming battle at the polls between the two major parties, one of which stands for the present commonwealth status and the other for statehood.

In the U.S. it is generally assumed that all or nearly all of Puerto Rico is happy and contented with its existing status, but actually there is a substantial dissent. Just how big this is nobody knows (that's what the plebiscite, if it is held, is supposed to determine).

* * *

In any case, Puerto Rico is neither fish nor fowl. There is no other status quite like it anywhere else in the world. It is part of the U.S. and yet isn't. The people escape the income tax but not the draft. And so it goes.

Modern Puerto Rico is really almost the work of one man, the incomparable Munoz Marin, who founded the Popular Democratic Party and was the governor for many years until he retired.

But even in "retirement" he is Mister Puerto Rico, with an immense popular following, particularly among the workers and peasants. He is the father of the "commonwealth" arrangement with the U.S., and as long as he continues to favor it (and he does wholeheartedly), it probably will persist.

Nevertheless, there seems to be a growing sentiment for statehood. Blessed by the strong leadership of Luis Ferre and Miguel Garcia Mendez, the Republican Statehood Party has shot up from 83,172 votes in 1952 to 284,627 in 1964.

This is still only a little over 34 per cent of the total vote, but there is a strong belief that the percentage would be considerably larger in an election where statehood was the only issue.