

## **THE MILITANT: Cuba marks centennial of Independent Party of Color**

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Tue Dec 23, 2008 1:38 pm (PST)

THE MILITANT

Vol. 72/No. 51 December 29, 2008

<http://www.themilitant.com/2008/7251/725150.html>

Cuba marks centennial of Independent Party of Color  
Two presentations on little-known history of party  
that championed black rights in Cuba in early 1900s

The story of the Independent Party of Color (PIC) in Cuba, from its founding in 1908 to the massacre in 1912 of more than 3,000 of its black and mulatto members and supporters, is a chapter of history largely unknown within Cuba and abroad.

Knowledge of the PIC and the 1912 massacre was buried by the various capitalist regimes in Cuba between then and 1958. Even after the Cuban Revolution's triumph in 1959, these events remained little-known.

The story of the Independent Party of Color is intertwined with the legacy and reality of racism in Cuba. The 1959 revolution eliminated all legal forms of discrimination, including Jim Crow practices imposed on Cuba during the U.S. military occupation following 1898. And by eliminating the source of institutionalized racism—capitalism—it opened the door to unprecedented gains by blacks and mulattos and their fuller integration into all aspects of Cuban society.

But many deep-rooted prejudices nonetheless remained. With the collapse in 1990-91 of the Soviet and Eastern European regimes, Cuba lost 85 percent of its foreign trade. Cuba's increased exposure to the world capitalist market and the economic measures the government had to take in response to this crisis have led to increased inequalities, leading to the reinforcing of racial prejudices that had long been diminishing.

The decision last year by the Communist Party of Cuba to establish a commission to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the PIC's founding was thus of great importance, not just in rescuing this historical chapter from oblivion, but as part of addressing the challenge of combating the legacy of racism today.

The commission's president is Fernando Martínez Heredia, a noted Marxist author and essayist and winner of the 2006 National Social Sciences Award. Other members include Digna Castañeda Fuertes, professor of Caribbean studies at the University of Havana; Marta Cordies Jackson, director of the Fernando Ortiz African Cultural Center; Eusebio Leal, official historian of Havana; Rogelio Martínez Fure, National Folkloric Ensemble of Cuba; author and poet Nancy Morejón; Leida Oquendo, the commission's executive secretary and a member of the Cuban Academy of Sciences; veteran journalist Marta Rojas; and filmmaker Gloria Rolando.

Below are major excerpts from presentations to two events organized by the commission this year, reviewing the history of the PIC and its importance for today. The first, titled "Social Diversity Is Not a Weakness of the Nation, but Rather a Very Important Example of its Richness," was given by Fernando Martínez Heredia at the opening session of the commission's work on January 14. The second, titled "Preserving Memory," was given by Miguel Barnet on August 7 to a meeting in Havana commemorating the 100th anniversary of the PIC's founding. Miguel Barnet is president of the Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC) and author of *Biography of a Runaway Slave*.

The translation and subheadings are by the Militant.

—MIKE TABER

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BY FERNANDO MARTÍNEZ HEREDIA

The great export-based economy that led Cuba to advance so far materially during the 19th century was built on the bases of a massive slave population numbering a million Africans, the chief labor force of that mode of production. It was a horrific form of exploitation and cultural plunder, embodying a social order of oppression, deep inequalities, castes, and antiblack racism. That social order was the antithesis of the great advances in technology, enterprise, ideas, literature, and art of that era. But at the same time it furnished the material basis that made these possible. Such terrible contradictions could not be overcome through evolution, because the only concern of the ruling class of Cuba was capitalist profits and maintaining its social power. It therefore defended at all times the system that enabled it to be the exploiter, and it did not hesitate to be antinational when necessary.

Insurrections against Spanish rule

A new situation was created by the armed insurrections of 1868 and 1898.1 The revolution of 1868 united abolitionism with the fight for independence, and forged ties between the races based on shared blood, sacrifice, and

heroism. The revolution of 1895, with its popular liberation war and mass sacrifices by the Cuban people to defeat Spanish colonialism, attacked the root of the colonial order and developed fraternal relations between the races, mutual respect, and the ideal of equality of all before the law and in social life. Decades of evolution and reforms could never have obtained what was achieved during those years of combat and mobilization. Blacks and mulattos participated in that war on a vast scale.

But the imperialist intervention and occupation stymied the revolution and cut short the country's sovereignty. The republic of 1902 remained under a new form of domination by neocolonialism and by the Cuban bourgeoisie, an accomplice and subordinate of imperialism.

Cuba attained its independence as a republic and the popular masses achieved citizenship, but under those conditions there were no social changes in the interests of working people or small farmers. Black and mulatto Cubans suffered permanently from the very disadvantageous social situation in which slavery and colonialism had left them, and they lacked the possibilities to pressure, negotiate, and obtain their rights. Racism was able to preserve great strength both in work and in society as a whole, as well as in the political arena. There was a great contradiction between this situation and the ideals of the mambí effort,<sup>2</sup> and with the democratic character that the republic should have had. Dissatisfaction among the old combatants and among the black and mulatto population often found expression during those first years of the century... .

On Aug. 7, 1908, the Independent Group of Color was founded in Havana. Chairing the meeting was war veteran Evaristo Estenoz Corominas, and the secretary was journalist Gregorio Surín. Following the elections of November of that year, intensive organizational work was conducted. Soon the Independent Party of Color was constituted in virtually the entire country, coming to have thousands of sympathizers and followers. In February 1910 Colonel Pedro Ivonet joined. A mambí hero from the Invasion and the Pinar del Río campaign, he assumed the chairmanship of the party in Oriente.

The new party organized its activities utilizing legal methods of public expression and electoral activity. Like many other blacks and mulattos, the Independents linked their republican and democratic nationalism to demands and efforts for social advancement and to achieve civil rights as men and women "of color." But they tried to achieve these goals and confront racism through a political party, as a tool that could theoretically be used within the norms of the system.

I call attention to the demands of their program, because these were very advanced and went far beyond the racial dimension. The Independents always identified themselves as Cubans, and demanded a sovereign, egalitarian

republic, defending jobs for the native-born, for the return to Cuba of economic emigres, and for immigration without racial discrimination. They advocated the eight-hour day and labor courts to hear disputes between workers and bosses; distribution of state and other lands to poor Cubans who worked them; and defense of farmers against land grabbers. They called for free education on all levels, and state control of education. They called for changes in the administration of justice and the prison system that favored fairness and education of the poor. And they advocated other measures that transcended racial questions.

Together with other Cubans, the Independents criticized U.S. domination, the usurpation of territory by the Guantánamo base, and the prevailing racism in the U.S. But the relations between nationalism and the racial question were complex and uncertain, because racism clearly expressed the country's retreat with regard to the revolutionary practices and program of 1895. Social conservatism was the necessary counterweight to the existence of the republic and economic liberalism. Patriotism had to be blind to races, and therefore keep quiet in face of injustices committed for racial reasons. The idea of risking the loss of sovereignty at the hands of the U.S. was linked to the untouchability of the existing order, and every movement that genuinely or supposedly threatened this order was condemned. "National interest" could be used to wall off demands and organizations of social or racial struggle, with the oppressor and oppressed having common interests. This wasn't simply imposed. The nation had meaning and it had values that were very important for the majority of the country. Therefore the majority of persons "of color" kept apart from, or rejected, political actions based on race in the case of the Independents of Color, even during the great crime of 1912. Some undoubtedly had little consciousness. But many did not agree with racial mobilization as a basis of political action.

From 1908 to 1912 the members of the PIC confronted all this—indifference or incomprehension, but above all the systematic attacks of the neocolonial bourgeois power and its instruments. Slandered in a thousand ways, cynically accused of being racists, the PIC was outlawed in 1910 through an amendment to the Electoral Law (the Morúa Amendment), with many leaders and activists imprisoned for six months. With great tenacity and consistency, they defended their cause in the newspaper *Previsión*, and every way they could, without getting involved in political wheeling and dealing as was common at the time. Harassed and prevented from utilizing the electoral road, they opted finally to hold an armed protest on May 20, 1912, the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the Republic. Their aim was to demand the party's legalization. In Oriente thousands of Independents rose up with very few arms, and without a real plan of war, with Estenoz and Ivonet in charge. In Las Villas there were also uprisings.

That tactic turned out to be disastrous. The government of José Miguel Gómez

went from political juggling to mobilizing thousands of troops against them, while a very dirty press campaign demonized them. During June and July a bloodbath was carried out with impunity by the republican government. Estenoz, Ivonet, and at least 3,000 nonwhite Cubans were murdered, the majority in Oriente province. This served only to repress a broad sector of the Oriente peasantry that was dispossessed and impoverished by capitalist expansion. A great wave of repression, prisons, persecutions, and an intensification of antiblack racism swept over the entire country. The official republic celebrated the great crime at the end of that summer, and then immediately consigned it to oblivion, a situation that lasted almost half a century.

In 1959 the victorious insurrection put forward for all Cubans a supraracial egalitarianism. The vast transformation of life, social relations, and institutions created the foundation for that goal to be attainable. In the struggles and intensive work that followed, the unity of the people was extolled as a higher political virtue. Brotherhood among Cubans of different races and social origins was considered an ideal that could be realized quickly, and a clear announcement of definitive liberation. In the midst of concrete work and the development of consciousness that offered equal opportunities, racism was rejected and condemned as a scourge of the past. And confidence grew that the advance of socialism would eliminate defects among individuals and social remnants.

In the 1960s some publications referred to the great racist repression of 1912 as part of an abominable past, but there was little analysis of its meaning and its place in the history of racism and capitalist rule in Cuba.<sup>3</sup> Following this, 1912 returned to the shadows in the historical culture that was becoming socialist in the country, even though a number of authors were doing historical research into this event, something that in recent years has made significant contributions.

Initiative by Cuban leadership

Nevertheless, the initiative of the Communist Party in creating this commission is not the result of such advances, but rather of the realities, needs, and plans of Cuba today. The great crisis that hit the country 15 years ago—and the measures adopted to overcome it—have produced notable changes in a number of aspects of material and spiritual life, and have had an impact on behavior, values, ways of living, motivations, and expectations. Social disintegration has brought to light many diversities—and in some cases has fueled them. But we are not observing such processes with fear. Social diversity is not a weakness of the nation, but rather a very important example of its richness. It's not a question of simply admitting these things, or tolerating them. They must be understood as a force with extraordinary potential. The socialist road will become strong and will deepen if it is capable of embracing these diversities and

living with them, of leading them and learning from them simultaneously, of respecting their identities and attending to their demands—at the same time as they are asked to contribute to the effort of all and to give a large part of their virtues and their work to the community.

The racial question has been raised increasingly in recent years. We note again that a large part of those who continue to be the most disadvantaged are blacks and mulattos, and that racism flourishes when ties of solidarity and socialist values weaken. In the muffled but tremendous cultural battle taking place between those ties and the relations and values of capitalism, it's clear which side should be taken by those who are conscious of their position in society and of the social process they must defend. Today a part of the Cuban population are Cuban above all, like the Independents of Color almost a century ago, but also identify themselves as blacks and mulattos. We need those identities and that consciousness to march hand in hand, and to strengthen the socialist revolution and its work. Like all important things, this is very difficult to realize in practice... .

It's the job of this commission to help recover the historical memory of a stage of the struggles and aspirations of the Cuban people for their rights and their liberation from all domination, broadening one part of the national consciousness and helping to better understand the painful and tenacious cultural legacy of racism in our country.

It must thus encourage an understanding of the pluralistic character of the nation's culture, and turning that complex richness into a greater force in our way of life and of the social undertaking we defend... .

If we work as brothers and sisters, in an organized way and without faltering, and we advance along this road, then we will fulfill this task.

Thank you very much.

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BY MIGUEL BARNET

As is almost always the case, history is written by the conquerors, and the conquered are therefore described through the eyes and psychology of the ruling classes. Such was the fate of the Independent Party of Color, humiliated and outraged by bourgeois politics and history during the neocolonial republic. All Cubans owe a great debt to those patriots who, on Aug. 7, 1908, exactly 100 years ago today, led by Pedro Ivonet and Evaristo Estenoz and meeting in the latter's home, founded a party that was stigmatized for almost 100 years... .

The party, apart from calling for civil rights for Cuban blacks and

mulattos, had a broad social program to benefit the poorest strata, irrespective of color. This included the right to strike, the eight-hour day, the right to education up to the highest levels, health care, and other benefits that, if achieved, would have been a social conquest unprecedented in the history of the continent.

Not only did “persons of color”—the term of the day—constitute the members and sympathizers of the party, but it was essentially a Cuban party. Those who did not act like patriots were their oppressors, the veritable traitors who committed an unforgivable holocaust.

In 1908 Cuba was undergoing its second military occupation by Yankee troops. As we know, the newly emerging empire employed all methods at its disposal to economically and politically dominate our country. Racial and social discrimination played a part in its strategy, just as it did in the United States itself. This schema was mechanically imposed on Cuba, which left traces that have still not been erased... .

History has not done justice to the movement of the Independents of Color. Cuba’s history has been a history of genocide. Of our aboriginal peoples—the first inhabitants of the island—whose numbers decreased by several hundred thousand during the sixteenth century. Of the Ladder Conspiracy.<sup>4</sup> Of Valeriano Weyler’s concentration camps in the last battle for liberty.<sup>5</sup> Of the tyrant Fulgencio Batista, who showed off his methods of torture and terror at Moncada,<sup>6</sup> in city streets, and during a rash of murders committed during the Bloody Christmas massacre.<sup>7</sup> Of the genocide of military aggression and terrorist acts against the revolution. What is almost never mentioned, however, is the genocide of those courageous Cubans who, between 1908 and 1912, defended the rights of the Cuban people to join a political party that at the time was the only one that genuinely represented them.

Our best tribute to them in this centennial year is the commemorative plaque unveiled this morning as part of other activities that have taken place at various times throughout this year, and that will continue over the following months.

Making a reality, with ever increasing revolutionary consciousness, of the social justice advocated by those of us who carry forward our Martí-ist, and Fidelista socialist undertaking—embodying within it full social equality, is to also recall Ivonet and Estenoz and all the patriots who followed them. It is to recognize the human right to knowledge of the historical truth. It is to prevent crimes like that of the Little War of 1912 from recurring. It is to preserve the memory of men like Aponte,<sup>8</sup> Estenoz, and Ivonet, who must not remain, even a single day longer, in oblivion.

Glory to them

1. From 1868 to 1898 Cubans waged a series of wars for independence from Spain. The first, the Ten Years War, lasted from 1868 to 1878, followed by the “Little War” in 1879-80. The final war for independence was fought from 1895 to 1898, leading to the end of Spanish colonial rule. It was immediately followed, however, by a U.S. military occupation of the country.
2. Mambí was the name given to fighters against Spanish colonial rule in Cuba’s wars of independence.
3. The main proponents of this line were leaders of the former pro-Moscow Popular Socialist Party (PSP), who asserted that going back to this history would be “divisive.” For example, the only serious work on the Independents of Color until recently was a 1950 book by a PSP member whose father had been a leader of the PIC (*Los independentes de color* by Serafin Portuondo). But immediately after publication, the book was attacked in the PSP’s press as being “un-Marxist,” with criticisms of the PIC for “dividing the working class.”
4. In 1844 Spanish colonial authorities announced they had discovered plans for a slave revolt organized by free Blacks and slaves, which became known as the “Ladder Conspiracy,” referring to the ladders to which suspects were bound as they were whipped until they “confessed” or died. Although the existence of such a conspiracy is in doubt, 98 people were sentenced to death, and many others were imprisoned, exiled, or died under torture.
5. During the 1895-98 war, Spanish general Valeriano Weyler was appointed governor of Cuba, with orders to suppress the independence struggle. His most notorious act was herding more than 300,000 rural residents into concentration camps to prevent them from aiding the independence fighters. At least 200,000 died from starvation and disease.
6. On July 26, 1953, some 160 revolutionaries under the command of Fidel Castro launched an insurrectionary attack on the Moncada army garrison in Santiago de Cuba together with a simultaneous attack on the garrison in Bayamo, opening the revolutionary armed struggle against the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship. After the attack’s failure, Batista’s forces massacred more than 50 of the captured revolutionaries. Fidel Castro and 27 others, including Raúl Castro and Juan Almeida, were tried and sentenced to up to 15 years in prison. They were released on May 15, 1955, after a public defense campaign forced the regime to issue a general amnesty for political prisoners.
7. On Christmas Eve 1956, Batista’s police in a number of towns in eastern Cuba kidnapped and murdered 23 members of the July 26 Movement and Popular Socialist Party.

8. José Aponte led a slave rebellion in 1812. He was captured and hanged.

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