

Why Is Oscar López Rivera Still A Political Prisoner?

September 28, 2016



Oscar López Rivera is the longest-held Puerto Rican political prisoner in U.S. history. He has now served 35 years in U.S. federal prisons, including 12 in solitary confinement. The movement calling for his release has intensified, broadened and strengthened in the last few years.

For example, on June 20, 2016, solidarity events with Oscar López took place on all six continents, and in 39 countries, including Chile, Cuba, Eritrea, France, Kenya, Mauritius, Mexico, Syria, Switzerland and Venezuela. In addition, five Nobel prize winners, Archbishop Desmond Tutu (South Africa); Jose Ramos-Horta (East Timor), Adolfo Pérez Esquivel (Argentina), Jodi Williams (United States) and Mairead Corrigan Maguire (Ireland) took part that day in actions urging President Obama to release López. Who is Oscar and why is he still imprisoned? Why is the movement for his freedom growing, and how does it relate to the current economic crisis in Puerto Rico?

Oscar López was born in Puerto Rico but grew up in Chicago, after his father migrated here for work. When he returned from Vietnam in 1967, he worked against the substandard housing conditions, the skyrocketing dropout rate and the lack of jobs or well-paying employment that plagued the Puerto Rican community of Chicago. Along with several other community activists, he founded an alternative high school for 16 Puerto Rican youth in 1972. Since that time, hundreds of kids have graduated from the high school now known as Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School. It enrolls roughly 180 students a year.

In 1976, the Chicago police and FBI announced they had found a FALN (Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional) bomb factory in a garage owned by Chicagoan Carlos Alberto Torres. From that date until his arrest in 1981, López's whereabouts were unknown.

Between 1974 and 1980 the FALN carried out 120 bombings against U.S. military facilities, banks and government and corporate offices. The goal of the bombings was to inform people in the United States about, and to mobilize them against, U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico, the imprisonment of the five Nationalist Party political prisoners and the abject conditions in which most Puerto Ricans lived, both on the mainland and the island.* Five people died as a result of the FALN bombings, one because he was not evacuated from the Mobil Oil building in New York City, despite the FALN warning that an explosion would soon occur. The other four were killed in 1975 when the FALN bombed the upscale restaurant Fraunces Tavern in lower Manhattan in retaliation for the murder of independentistas in Puerto Rico.

Members of the FALN eluded capture until 1980, when 11 Puerto Ricans were arrested in Evanston,

Illinois, and accused of being members of the FALN. They, and Oscar López, who was arrested on May 1981 in a Chicago suburb, declared themselves prisoners of war and refused to participate in their trials. They were all convicted of a variety of state charges and of the federal charge of seditious conspiracy, conspiring to overthrow the U.S. government through the use of force or violence; in other words fighting to end U.S. colonial rule in Puerto Rico. Although no evidence tied him to any of the bombings, Oscar López received a sentence of 55 years, to which 15 years were later added after he was convicted of attempting to escape the prison.

President Bill Clinton granted López and ten other Puerto Rican political prisoners clemency in 1999. López refused the offer since it did not include two of the prisoners, Carlos Alberto Torres and Haydeé Beltran, who have since been released. Thus, as of this writing, López has served an additional 17 years beyond the date he had been granted clemency. One reason for this is that when he goes before the parole board, the FBI and family members of those killed in Fraunces Tavern mobilize against his release. Because the FBI has failed to pin the bombing of Fraunces Tavern on anyone, they want to make sure that the last remaining accused member of the FALN remains in prison.

Puerto Ricans who have marched, signed petitions, made phone calls, written letters or engaged in any of the numerous activities that have been held calling for López's freedom cover the entire political spectrum. They range from politicians who support statehood for Puerto Rico, to the current mayor of San Juan, who supports the Commonwealth (Puerto Rico's current status), to religious leaders, to major cultural figures such as the Grammy award winning rapper Calle 13. The otherwise disunited independence movement is united in its support for Oscar's release.

This support for Oscar's release, galvanized by organizations in the United States and on the island under the slogan "It's time to bring Oscar home," reflects the strong sense of Puerto Rican identity that defines Puerto Ricans wherever they live. The sense that Oscar is in jail, suffering a disproportionately long sentence, despite the fact that President Clinton offered him clemency, also mirrors the fairly widespread feeling that the U.S. government does not care about Puerto Ricans and ignores their needs, interests and demands.

The U.S. government's failure to adequately or even partially address the economic crisis that has swept Puerto Rico and resulted in the underfunding or elimination of hospitals and schools and cutbacks in jobs and wages is both a continuation and an intensification of U.S. colonialism. The situation and expectations are so dismal that thousands of Puerto Ricans have abandoned their homeland, seeking jobs, better salaries or education in the United States. In response to the crisis, the U.S. government has imposed PROMESA, the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Act, on Puerto Rico. The board that oversees the implementation of this act, staffed by capitalists, does not have the best interests of Puerto Rico at heart. Instead, much as Naomi Klein spelled out in *The Shock Doctrine*, the managers of hedge funds, some of whom are part of the board that oversees PROMESA, view the dismal state of affairs as an opportunity to profit from Puerto Rico's economic woes.

There is not a direct link between the breadth of support Puerto Ricans have expressed for the release of Oscar López and the growing opposition to PROMESA, since the former predated the latter. Yet, in the eyes of many Puerto Ricans and those who oppose U.S. colonialism, there is an obvious and nefarious tie. The U.S. government views Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans through the eyes of a colonial master. It disregards their needs and ignores their wishes. It has not released the longest-held political prisoner in Puerto Rican history, and it has not taken the necessary steps to overcome the devastating economic crisis that promises only increased privations for Puerto Ricans.

For information on how to support the release of Oscar López, see the National Boricua Human

Rights Network, <http://boricuahumanrights.org/>.

Originally posted here.