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COVER

Little Robin Triplett, 3, is daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Leo Triplett, teachers in the East St. Louis, Illinois, school system. Little Robin has a junior life membership in the NAACP, a gift from her aunt, Mrs. Amanda Triplett, also a teacher in the E. St. Louis school system.—Photo by Phillip L. Beck.

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This One

MAY, 1961



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Castro and the Cuban Negro

By Juan René Betancourt

In Cuba, as in most parts of the New World, there are differences in the treatment of Negro and white citizens. And the differences are so great that they may be correctly labeled "racial discrimination." This is an evil which I have fought in my native country for the last twenty-five years and, as a consequence, I have had firsthand experience with it. Cuban Negroes have fought for their rights by grouping themselves into societies. There are one or two in each town and these local groups are integrated in provincial federations and the National Federation. It is the National Federation which spearheads the

fight against racial discrimination.

The day after Castro's victory the Revolutionary Government made me a delegate-interventor in the National Federation of Negro societies, the island's main Negro organization. This was done because all previous leaders of the Federation had been involved in the Batista dictatorship, where they had occupied ministerial and senatorial posts. When Castro came to power these individuals were obliged to flee the country. And I was also the founder of the National Organization for Economic Rehabilitation of the Negro, an organization which opposed those who had delivered the National Federation to dictator Batista.

DR. JUAN RENÉ BETANCOURT is a lawyer by profession and was secretary-general of la Sociedad "Victoria" in Camagüey and cultural secretary of la Federación Provincial de Sociedades Negras de Camagüey. Castro made him a supervising-delegate of la Federación de Sociedades Negras de Cuba. Dr. Betancourt is the author of many books among which are *Mi Opinión y Mi Raza* (1945) and *Doctrina Negra* (1955).

My job was to reorganize the provincial federations and to prepare for the Seventh National Convention of Negro Societies. My purpose was to reactivate the normal activities of the Negro movement and to present the Castro government with a specific program designed to make the Cuban Negro a first-class rather than a fifth-class citizen. I began by

reorganizing the province of Pinar del Río. There were twenty-seven societies in this province, but at the time only four of them were in Communist hands. Because of the opposition of Communist delegates, I had to issue three different meeting notices before I could convene the congress.

The Communists said I wanted to become a government minister and that I had no authority to call the meeting. They even threatened to show up with armed groups as representatives of certain organizations which actually did not exist. When I refused them admittance, they created a disturbance, and even insulted me. Meanwhile, the Communist organ, *Hoy*, began to attack me with daily calumnies. These attacks, plus those of hypocritical Salvador García Aguero in "The Outpost of Ideas," a Communist party radio program, created confusion and bewilderment.

I had to exclude the Communists before I could successfully reorganize the Federation of Negro Societies in Pinar del Río, and I had to place a disciplinary squad at the doors to bar them from meetings, as was the case with the Sociedad Luz de Occidente of San Cristóbal, Pinar del Río. Sole purpose of the Communists was to create disorder and to break up the organizations. Similar disturbances took place in the other provinces. We did not want to exclude anyone; our desire was to welcome the delegates from all societies, whatever their political or social ideology; but we always found it impossible to come to an understanding with the Communists. They

had only one objective: to prevent reorganization of the provincial federations and the holding of a National Congress.

COMMUNISTS IN POWER

Although I was accustomed to seeing the Communists working to get control of various movements and organizations (workers, women, peasants, and Negroes), I was somewhat disconcerted when I discovered that their real objective was to destroy. When the Communists are out of power, they are opportunistic and work to occupy key positions in organizations and movements. Once they obtain power, as in Cuba today, they reveal their real colors: to suppress all opposition, dissident opinions, and rival organizations. Cuban labor unions, for example, have been emasculated; they have no power nor functions as labor unions; they are under government control. On Labor Day they did not make a single demand and Sr. David Salvador, leader of the national federation of labor unions, was jailed when he opposed usurpation of power by the Ministry of Labor.

This is why the Communists opposed my reorganization of Negro organizations. After I had overcome these obstacles, I visited the President to inform him that the Seventh National Convention would be held November 26-28, 1959. To my surprise, while I was visiting the society of *El Fenix* in Trinidad, Las Villas, it was broadcast that I had "resigned" from my post because of the pressure of other duties.

Nobody in Cuba believed Castro a Communist and he has emphatical-



DR. J. R. BETANCOURT

ly denied being one although the membership and the policies of his first cabinet suggested Communist connections despite the fact that none was a Communist. But Castro eliminated all non-Communist ministers within a few months, replacing them with anonymous Communists. He made, however, few replacements in the lower echelons because these had been controlled by the Communists from the day Castro seized power. Since Communist theory is that they are the proletariat and that class conflict has been eliminated, non-Communist organizations are not needed. This dogma naturally brought the Negro organizations into collision with the government.

The Negro societies in Cuba are very poor associations. Traditionally, it has been the policy of the Cuban government to flatter the Negroes by giving them contributions for the establishment of Negro organizations. I was always opposed to this

policy because it attacked effects and not causes. Now, under Castro, the situation has worsened: instead of giving the societies money, the societies must contribute to the government. They are obliged to hold public dances and then to turn over the proceeds to the government for agrarian reform and, more recently, for arms, planes, and industrialization. Administrations before Castro were made up of competing political parties and as a consequence they were obliged to appoint Negroes to important government posts. But since continuance of the present Cuban government does not depend upon free elections, and since much of its power is derived from a formidable police and military apparatus, there has been no need to appoint Negroes to important governmental posts. The Cuban Negro is today further removed than ever from the government payroll. Nor is that all.

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN CUBA

In order to exploit human weakness, while giving play to flamboyant demagoguery, this master of deceit that is Sr. Fidel Castro has decreed that dances must be held every Saturday and Sunday in select places which had previously barred Negroes. Such action, coupled with an intensive governmental propaganda campaign, has led many Negroes to believe that in this way they are taking reprisals against their discriminators and achieving racial equality by being allowed to patronize previously "all-white" places. These same Negroes do not patronize their own organizations, which are impover-

ished and closing their doors. Yet Sr. Castro and the Communists are receiving thousands of dollars weekly from Negroes at government-sponsored dances.

The Communist regime in Cuba has declared over and over again, with typical insistence and boring emphasis, that racial discrimination has been eliminated on the island. Public announcements of the Castro regime would make it appear that racial discrimination is something to be established or eliminated on the basis of a governmental decree. Castro's regime ignores the historical, economic, and social factors which are the genesis of discrimination and which continue to perpetuate it. Nor does the government seem aware of the truth that a government may, by its policies and practices, create an *ambiance* favorable to racial equality. A mere governmental fiat, however, does not meet the problem. Hence Sr. Castro's assertion that his government has eradicated racial discrimination in Cuba is not only false but is bleating demagoguery.

The Communists kept the offices of the National Federation of Negro Societies open for two or three months after they had decided that I had "resigned." Then they distributed the furniture among themselves and abolished the local. Provincial federations had no better luck; they have all disappeared. Of the 256 Negro societies in Cuba, many have had to close their doors and others are in death agony. One can truthfully say, and this is without the slightest exaggeration, that the Negro movement in Cuba died at the hands of Sr. Fidel Castro.

Yet this is the man who had the cynical impudence to visit the United States in 1960 for the purpose of censuring American racial discrimination. Although this evil quite obviously exists in the United States, Castro is not precisely the man to offer America solutions, nor even to pass judgment. Here is a man with the total powers of a dictator, yet he has not eliminated the racial evil in his own country, Cuba. What he has done is to heighten it in a most scandalous way. He has merely brought added hunger, misery, and misfortune to the lot of the Cuban Negro.

When Fidel Castro returned to Cuba from New York, he had us to understand that he had won over the American Negro and that he was going to bring 300 of them to Cuba to view the "terrestrial paradise." Cuban Negro leaders merely looked at each other when they heard this announcement. They asked: "What's he going to show them?" Consider one fact. Whereas Castro could stay at a Negro-owned hotel in Harlem, Cuban Negroes do not own a single hotel, or commercial establishment or industry. And Castro has done nothing to remedy this situation; what he has done is to reduce all Cuban citizens to the same miserable standard of living by his assaults upon the country's economy.

I am convinced that Communism gets a toe-hold in countries not because of the magic of its Utopian doctrines, but because of the ignorance and the poor tactics of capitalists and democratic leaders with their pig-headed resistance to even the minimal demands of the people.

This, I believe, is the genesis of those dissatisfied and resentful masses which nourish the Communist party. I do not understand why intelligent business men do not see the advantage in lowering their profits by twenty or thirty per cent, and thus to keep their compatriots happy, rather than to have international Communism take over their country as in Cuba. Now they have lost all their property and their earnings—and in some cases their lives.

Cubans are a good example of this shortsightedness. They have formed many organizations of exiled Cubans to work for the downthrow of Castro and his Communist regime. All are controlled by white Cubans, members of the upper or middle-middle class, who have refused to accept Castro's pattern of subhuman living. Yet they do not exhibit the slightest interest in the fate of the Cuban Negro. They seem not to care that he lived a miserable and unhappy life before Castro and that he is continuing to live the same way under Castro. Nor do they seem worried that Cuban Negroes may continue to live as pariahs even after Castro has gone—even though the future government might be a so-called democratic government. None of these exile-groups has committed itself to a non-discrimination program should they get in power.

The Cuban Negro is never mentioned in their programs or pronouncements. Whenever this omission is brought to their attention, their reply is that they are such good democratic souls that race does not exist for them. White and black Cubans are all Cubans. It is a shame

that these organizations which would rescue Cuba from the clutches of Communism and which are working to bring freedom and the rule of law to Cuba do not wish to strike off the chains of racial prejudice. They show no generosity toward the Cuban Negro, who has given his blood and brawn to make Cuba.

An exception to this general attitude is exemplified by the Christian Democratic Party in exile. It is, to date, the only one that has shown itself ready to consider and to even discuss a serious program for bettering the lot of the Cuban Negro: A program to be put into effect after the fall of the present Communist regime in Cuba.

For my part, I am here fulfilling a historic mission for my country and for my race. I quote that great Cuban Negro, Don Juan Gualberto Gomez: "I hope that the former will never ask me to do anything that will prejudice the latter." I insist that the Negroes have specific rights to defend and that none of the revolutions, neither those for independence, nor the Communist, nor this one for democratic restoration, has had nor will have automatic effects against racial discrimination. Those who affirm that the condemnation of the ills of the Negro and the demand for their elimination divides Cubans and creates racial problems are either naive or unconsciously anti-Negro. As everyone knows, a sickness which is never treated can hardly be cured. The fact that we disregard the existence of an object does not, by any means, eliminate its presence.

(Translated from the Spanish by Brandon Robinson)