Sticks vs. speech

Violence mars UPR paint-in, 21 arrested

A police officer collars a student at the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras campus, Wednesday after a policewoman photographed one of them painting slogans on the pavement. Several students were roughed up and injured by police, who arrested 21 students.
Violence escalated Wednesday noon at the University of Puerto Rico after students and police clashed over the painting of slogans on the street in front of the Jose M. Lizaro Library.

More than 50 students were painting messages on the asphalt of what has come to be known as "Conscience Street" in front of the university library when a police officer started videotaping the activity. Indignant, some of the students questioned the reasons for his keeping tabs on them.

"We are not doing anything wrong. We are just painting here. We have the right to do so," said one of the students to the policewoman holding the video camera, who was immediately flanked by a group of some 12 police officers.

The situation turned violent when one of the students allegedly tried to take the camera from the officer, while others shouted insults to the group of agents. Almost immediately, a riot police squad came onto the scene and without any previous warning started beating the students with ball of their metal-tipped batons.

In similar situations riot police have been mobilized in a phalanx formation to create a perimeter and gain control of the area, but on Wednesday afternoon the orders seemed different. Some 30 officers charged down on the students wielding their batons indiscriminately and hitting anyone within reach.

Many of the students fled from the scene to a safer distance while others sought refuge in the library. Others yet stayed their ground and confronted the police. Some of the students flung the paint containers at the advancing police staining many of them, or threw stones at them. Others even resorted to hand-to-hand combat, managing to grab one or two riot police by the neck and hitting them until they could take them to the ground.

Students not participating in the demonstration were also rushed, hit and arrested by the police if they questioned or resisted the actions. In the end, 21 students were arrested and taken to different police stations throughout the San Juan metropolitan area. Female students were taken to the Capey Police Station, while the others were taken to the Loina Street and Monte Hatillo stations. Charges against the arrested students were undisclosed.

Earlier, a group of university employees affiliated to the Brotherhood of Exempt and Non-Teaching Employees (HEEND for its Spanish acronym) had stormed into the lobby of campus chancellor Ana R. Guadalupe's office and staged a sit-in while announcing their intention of staying there until the police will order them off the campus.

At the same time, university professors affiliated with the Puerto Rican Association of University Professors (APPU for its Spanish acronym) had been trying to meet with Guadalupe in an effort to negotiate an end to the "harassment, persecution and physical abuse against university students, teachers and employees." By 5 p.m., Guadalupe had not agreed to the meeting.

"We shall overcome," the last word

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"We shall overcome"
"We are announcing a 24-hour work stoppage, starting today (Wednesday) at 3 p.m. to protest police presence in our university," said APPU president Maria Gisela Rosario. 

In a written statement distributed to the press, Guadalupe condemned the day's violence and urged that "wisdom and prudence" prevail.

"This is a moment to come together in our commitment, as academicians, to face these times of hardship affecting our institution," said Guadalupe.

The chancellor denounced the student and labor leadership's actions of the day, falling short of blaming them for "vandalism," referring to the painting of the street.

Guadalupe called the announced APPU work stoppage "illegal," and urged all university personnel to come to work today (Thursday) and comply with their duties and responsibilities.

Guadalupe said the police will continue to stay on campus to guarantee institutional order.

The day ended with a march of citizens, many dressed in white, who entered the campus to take part in a vigil in solidarity with the students and to demand that police be ordered off the UPR campuses.

During the vigil, a group of students gained access to the university tower and unfurled a gigantic black banner that reached from the tower balcony to the ground reading "VENCEREMOS" (We shall overcome).
The police must leave campus

The latest events at the University of Puerto Rico have made evident, even to the most conservative, that the administration's heavy-handed policy towards the students is abusive, ineffective and plainly wrong.

The indiscriminate aggression of police riot squads against students, who are exercising their constitutional rights in public areas without interfering with any academic or administrative activity, is a gross violation of their rights and an act comparable only to the acts of the dictatorships we all denounce and reject.

By persisting in the use of brute force to impose order at the UPR, Gov. Fortuno's administration has dealt a blow not only to the concept of free speech, but to the principles governing university education. By no means can the development of critical thinking, effective communication and social responsibility be achieved with a police contingent watching over every hallway, every library, every plaza and even every student group with the pretext of "keeping the institutional order."

How has the university's institutional order been breached? Were the students rioting? Were they pulling other students from their classrooms? No. They were painting messages on the asphalt on one of the campus streets. Painting messages, along with distributing leaflets or publishing a newspaper, are constitutionally protected activities. Were the students interrupting traffic? Yes. And now we have to decide whether the inconvenience of having to circle around an area in our cars outweighs the benefits of freedom of speech. At the Daily Sun we consider the choice to be obvious.

Is this to be the new institutional order? Police every 100 feet? The right to free speech reduced to the 100 square feet between the two police officers? Has the UPR become the testing grounds for this new institutional order?

We do not want this new order, neither for our university, the Capitol, La Fortaleza or our neighborhoods. We reject it with all our might. Exercising our freedom of speech, our freedom of association, is not a crime.

UPR president Jose Ramon De La Torre and Rio Piedras campus Chancellor Ana R. Guadalupe, and all the other UPR system's chancellors for that matter, must order the police out of the university. Like the students chant in their slogans, the university should not be, cannot become "a military camp."

And once real institutional order is restored, De La Torre, Guadalupe, the system's chancellors, and the Board of Trustees should submit their resignations for having endangered Puerto Rico's most successful social project since its foundation in 1903.

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