

Dinner honors revolutionary activist Tomás Soto

written by Bill Dores

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Bill Dores, Radhames Morales, Tomás Soto, Sharon Black and Angel Vicioso.



Jacqueline Nunez, Tomás Soto, Marlyn Ramirez

One hundred and fifteen people packed a restaurant in the Dominican Republic city of Santiago on Feb. 29 to honor the life and work of Puerto Rican revolutionary activist Tomás Soto. Reservations had been made for 50. Soto now lives in Santiago

and is battling cancer.

Born in Brooklyn, N.Y., in 1943 and raised in Guánica, Puerto Rico, Soto was radicalized while serving in the U.S. Army in Vietnam. He played a leading role in many struggles in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. These included fighting for open admissions at City College of New York in 1969, organizing Vietnam veterans against the war and to fight for jobs and compensation for time lost in service, and founding the Prisoners Solidarity Committee to support prisoners fighting for justice inside U.S. prisons.

The highlight of the evening was a slideshow presentation by Soto. Reflecting his love of science, the slideshow started with the origins of the universe and life on earth, including evolution and human origins in Africa. It then went on to describe Soto's own fascinating life, which embodied many of the titanic working-class struggles of the 20th century.

Soto's mother and her family were Independentistas. He was raised in the barrio of Ensenada, where U.S. troops landed when they invaded Puerto Rico in 1898. One of his mother's cousins was murdered in the 1937 police massacre of Nationalists in Ponce, and he had kin arrested by U.S. troops suppressing the 1950 Jayuya uprising led by the Nationalist Party.

Soto's father was a founding member of the radical union local District 65, which organized retail and wholesale workers. During World War II, Soto's father joined the merchant marine and the National Maritime Union.

Soto was among the first U.S. soldiers sent to Vietnam. He was with Black fellow GI Elijah Seabrook on Sept. 15, 1963, when they got news that racists had bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., murdering Addie Mae Collins, 14, Cynthia Wesley, 14, Carole Robertson, 14, and Carol Denise McNair, 11.

"Why are we over here when our people are being slaughtered back home?" Seabrook asked.

From that point on, Soto became a rebel inside the military. He was reduced in rank and taken off sensitive assignments. He left Vietnam and the Army after being injured in a motorcycle accident and spent two years in rehab.

In 1969, Soto found himself at City College of New York, where he joined the Black and Puerto Rican Student Union. The CCNY campus was located in Harlem, but the student body was 93 percent white. In the spring of 1969, BPRSU members seized the university's South Campus to demand open admissions for Black and Brown youth. They chained shut the gates and renamed the campus the University of Harlem.

Soto was charged with securing one of the gates. The administration sent Black and Latinx security guards to force the gates open. Soto gave them a speech, saying, "We're doing this so your kids will have a right to go to school here." The guards refused to move on the students. After two weeks, the administration agreed to a settlement that transformed the composition of the student body throughout the CUNY system.

During the CCNY struggle, Soto met members of Youth Against War and Fascism, a militant organization that included some of the founders of Struggle-La Lucha. He joined YAWF and led its Prisoners Solidarity Committee. It was a time when prisoners across the country were organizing against intolerable conditions. The PSC raised the slogan that "Prisons are concentration camps for the poor."

The PSC was formed in answer to a call from prisoners at the state penitentiary in Auburn, N.Y., who were being persecuted for demanding basic human rights. On Sept. 9, 1971, inmates at the state prison in Attica, N.Y., rebelled, seizing one of the yards and taking guards hostage. They called for observers from people's

organizations, and Soto, representing the PSC, went there. He was able to enter the yard and meet the prisoners. Soto and the PSC stood with the inmates and their demands for union wages and representation, union-run vocational training for inmates and an end to racism and brutality by the guards and administration.

The state evicted the observers from the prison when they refused to be used against the prisoners. On Sept. 12, billionaire Gov. Nelson Rockefeller's state troopers invaded the prison and murdered 43 people, inmates and hostages both. The PSC organized protests around the country, breaking up banquets and public appearances by butcher Rockefeller.

Soto was also active in the American Servicemen's Union, an organization of anti-war GIs and veterans. As the U.S. withdrew from Vietnam, many GIs were coming home to a jobless economy. Black, Latinx and Native vets had it the worst.

The ASU organized protests at phony, corporate-sponsored job fairs that provided business tax breaks but no jobs. At a fair in Chicago, Soto jumped on a table and asked if anyone there had gotten a job. The answer was "No!" Thousands of veterans tore apart the fair and marched through the streets of Chicago to Mayor Daley's house.

Soto worked with the ASU to organize thousands of veterans to march on the White House on May 19, 1973. They marched against cuts in veterans' disability benefits and demanded \$2,500 compensation for time lost in service.

Soto played a leading role in many other struggles of the time. After Ronald Reagan's election, he helped organize the May 3, 1981, march on the Pentagon. The 120,000-strong march and rally had speakers from the liberation movements in El Salvador and Palestine and from the LGBTQ2S movement, which were groundbreaking at the time. Soto helped found the Nov. 29 Coalition for Palestine later that year.

Working as a porter, he became a shop steward in Local 32BJ. He led fights for better working conditions at Helmsley Industries, the Plaza Hotel and the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. At the latter, the high-paid bosses who ran the church told him the workers shouldn't get more money because they were "working for the Master." He was ultimately fired, but conditions for the workers were improved.

On Sept. 12, 1983, freedom fighters from Ejército Popular Boricua (Boricua Popular Army), also known as Los Macheteros, expropriated \$7 million from the Hartford branch of Wells Fargo Bank, one of the colonial banks plundering Puerto Rico. The FBI launched a wave of roundups and repression against the Puerto Rican independence movement. Soto worked with Esperanza Martell, José Alfaro and other activists to form the Puerto Rican Committee Against Repression.

Soto was also involved in community struggles in his Washington Heights neighborhood. In 1989, he was assaulted and stabbed by a landlord's goons for leading a rent strike for heat and hot water in the building he lived in. He spent 9 days in the hospital.

He returned to Puerto Rico in 1989, where he took part in the independence movement and the fight against U.S. naval shelling of the island of Vieques. In 1999, he moved to the Dominican Republic.

Marlyn Ramírez, who helped organize the Feb. 29 dinner, described Soto as "a living legend, a great human being whom I admire and respect ... a caring and humble man of great accomplishments."

Radhames Morales, the U.S. coordinator of the Dominican left party Fuerza de la Revolución, also attended the event. He said, "I have the honor of knowing Tom Soto for many decades and I can testify that he has been a lifelong revolutionary militant. Tom worked on many fronts of struggle in New York City, but what stood out most was his ongoing work for the independence of Puerto Rico. His fight against the war

in Vietnam, in which he played a protagonist role, and support for the Salvadoran guerrillas with their FMLN was outstanding. Tom also stood out in the student struggles in New York universities, but the front in which he impacted us most was the defense of the tenants rights in the Dominican community of upper Manhattan. For me, Tom Soto is an international militant who has demonstrated once again that the brotherhood knot that unites Cuba, Borinquen and Quisqueya is inseparable."

Members of Struggle-La Lucha from Baltimore and New York City also attended the event. SLL members did a video interview with Tom and are preparing a documentary on his life and work.

