

Profile of the Puerto Rican Worker

Brochures published by the Commonwealth government to induce U.S. industries to invest in Puerto Rico portray the Puerto Rican worker as eager and, above all, available. "You're due for a pleasant surprise on Puerto Rico's labor situation. Instead of the labor shortage prevailing in so many areas, Puerto Rico offers an abundance of young, productive workers." "Manufacturers can expect from 4 to 10 screened applicants for every job opening." "Also, wage levels are substantially lower than on the U.S. mainland. . . . And because jobs are so important to these workers, absenteeism and job turnover are low."

This crass appeal to businessmen by the government which has been central to their "success" in Puerto Rico, reflects a basic truth: that Puerto Rico's labor force is exploited, largely unemployed, unorganized in many cases and universally unprotected by law. What is a gloating portrayal of the labor situation by the ELA reveals, in fact, the worst indictment of its own conduct.

The social results of that conduct and workers' reactions to these results are the subject of this article.

Workers' salaries in today's Puerto Rico are one third what they are in the United States. Island workers are unorganized for the most part. To make matters worse, these two realities combine to perpetuate each other: unemployment threatens any worker who might protest low wages or attempt to unionize.

Those who are unionized find their locals largely controlled by international unions which are characterized by conceptions that promote peaceful coexistence between Puerto Rican workers and North American bosses. And all labor organizing has been restricted by the imposition of the federal Taft-Hartley law in Puerto Rico, a law which was implemented in the United States in 1947 to destroy the militant labor struggles taking place at that time.

This general overview is backed by the following facts.

—Puerto Rico has a labor force of 681,000 workers. 235,000 are employed in industry; 189,000 are public employees; 100,000 are employed in service and commerce respectively; and 35,000 are agricultural workers.

—58% of the manufacturing centers employ under 20 workers; only 9% employ over 150 workers.

—35% of all Puerto Rican workers are women.

—The average weekly income in 1970 was \$70.00.

—The unemployment rate according to the Puerto Rican Chamber of Commerce is over 30%.

—25% of all Puerto Rican workers are organized in unions.

—In the last 15 years the number of North American unions organized in Puerto Rico has increased by 58% while the

number of Puerto Rican unions has decreased by 33%. North American internationals control 45% of all organized labor in Puerto Rico.

This is the present situation, and the 75-year occupation of Puerto Rico by the United States has changed it in form but not in substance. Poverty and exploitation have remained constant: the rural coffee pickers, thrown out of work by the development of large sugar cane plantations by the United States at the turn of the century, became sugar cane cutters on those plantations. Cane cutters became factory workers when the U.S. implemented Operation Bootstrap, its plan to rapidly industrialize Puerto Rico. They also became part of the one million Puerto Ricans who migrated to the mainland to look for work when agriculture was destroyed and the developing industries didn't provide enough jobs. The standard of living of the present industrial worker, rather than improving, is constantly deteriorating.

The continued impoverishment of the Puerto Rican worker has historically led to militant labor struggles. In 1917 the Socialist Party was organized among sugar cane workers by Santiago Iglesias Pantin, an organizer sent by the American Federation of Labor. The Socialist Party helped found the Free Federation of Labor (FLT) in Puerto Rico, which was well received among the plantation workers, increasing the Socialist Party's popularity at the polls during the first two decades.

The Depression years, beginning in the late 20's, brought devastation to the island. Continued strikes by the sugar cane workers heightened the political climate. The FLT, however, had begun to deteriorate. Its position supporting U.S. control of the island, a position resulting from its ties to the AFL, led it to turn its back on the island-wide cane cutters strike in 1934. Thousands of workers turned to the Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico, the only party which drew a connection between the poverty of the Puerto Rican worker and U.S. colonialism. The 1934 strike was the last significant labor struggle until the creation of the General Federation of Labor (CGT) in the early 1940's.

The CGT organized thousands of workers through the 300 labor unions which made up its membership. Its effectiveness soon made it a threat to the United States. The Popular Democratic Party (PPD), a new political party being formed at that time by American-trained politician Luis Munoz Marin, was the tool used by the United States not only to destroy the workers movement, but also to undermine and eliminate the independence movement which had been developing during the 1930's and 40's.

The PPD sent organizers into the Genreal Confederation to work their way up into the leadership. When that was

accomplished, a split was created over the question of whether or not to have the leaders of the CGT run for political office on the slate of the PPD. Much of the leadership resisted this attempt to corral the labor movement into the arena of electoral politics. Those who had been sent in by the PPD insisted on running for office and the Federation was destroyed by the factions created over this issue.

Under Operation Bootstrap, U.S. industries which established subsidiaries in Puerto Rico brought in American international unions. As they were introduced alongside U.S. industry, these unions were incapable of combatting the intensification of colonialism based on cheap labor which Bootstrap represented. The majority of the international unions operating in Puerto Rico have not to this day defended the national interests of the Puerto Rican worker.

The year 1969 marked the reawakening of the Puerto Rican labor movement with the strike of the General Electric workers in Palmer. This strike, one of the longest and most militant in Puerto Rico's history, saw the first major intervention of the independence forces in Puerto Rican labor struggles since the '34 cane strike. With it, the crises of the colonial domination of Puerto Rico deepened, initiating a brush fire of strikes which still rages today.

What has followed has been the formation of a new leadership within the ranks of the labor movement. The rate of unionization has increased from 18 to 25% in the last few years. Many international unions are being influenced by their rank and file to take more progressive positions on questions which are vital to the Puerto Rican population.

In 1970 the United Labor Workers Movement (MOU) was organized. One of its fundamental objectives has been to promote unity within the organized labor movement. As stated in one of its documents, "For many years division and factionalism had been the outstanding characteristics of the Puerto Rican labor movement. Under these conditions it was little less than impossible to fight successfully to improve the living and working conditions of the workers and the few efforts working in that direction had provided little results."

MOU, which began as a Labor Committee incorporating a small group of labor leaders has grown into a federation of more than 100 unions representing 18% of all organized labor. Some of its most effective campaigns have been:

- for the application of the federal minimum wage law in Puerto Rico.
- against the high cost of living
- against the construction by U.S. corporations of a superport oil-refining complex in Puerto Rico.
- in favor of the unionization of public employees.
- and against the application of the Taft-Hartley law in Puerto Rico.

The MOU has also participated in and supported many of the hundreds of strikes which have hit Puerto Rico in the last few years, paralyzing the most important sectors of the economy.

The 1972 strike of the workers of the American-owned newspaper, *El Mundo*, reflected the growing militancy of the Puerto Rican labor movement. During the 7-month strike,

repeated confrontations with strikebreakers and the Tactical Police Force, in which many workers and supporters were beaten and arrested, led to the bombing of five helicopters which were being used to bring the strikebreakers.

In July, 1973 the Electrical Workers Union (UTIER) went out on strike, affecting the whole island. Immediately following this, the Firemen's Union and the Sanitation workers in San Juan also went out on strike. As his solution to the critical situation created by the three simultaneous strikes and the government's refusal to negotiate with the workers, the Governor of Puerto Rico called out the National Guard. This drastic action on the part of the Governor had not been used since the Nationalist Party uprising in 1950.

Puerto Rico's teachers, a largely unorganized sector of the labor force, have traditionally been conservative. The majority are members of the Teachers Association of Puerto Rico, an organization created and controlled by the government. In January 1974 the Teachers Union of Puerto Rico, which has organized 10% of Puerto Rico's teachers, went out on strike, setting a precedent for that sector of the labor force. The government brought in the police and threatened to call out the National Guard. The leadership was arrested and schools were occupied by policemen.

All of these strikes, taking place in a context of economic deterioration have deepened the political instability on the island. While the governor has promised to create more jobs and slow down galloping inflation which has made the cost of living in Puerto Rico 25% higher than in the United States, the Economic Development Administration of Puerto Rico is secretly developing plans which would completely destroy Puerto Rico as a nation.

Government documents have revealed that massive migration to the U.S. and sterilization programs are being discussed as solutions to Puerto Rico's economic crises. Under the plan two million Puerto Ricans would be forced to emigrate so that U.S. multinational corporations such as Kennecott, American Metal Climax, Gulf and Exxon can strip mine Puerto Rico's abundant copper deposits and establish a superport-oil refining complex to import and refine massive quantities of Mid-East oil to be transported to the United States.

The entrenchment of U.S. colonial domination in Puerto Rico which these plans represent is being exposed before the labor movement. A Congress on the High Cost of Living, organized by over 80 labor unions, has already condemned the superport project. Alternative economic development plans which would create employment rather than destroy it, are being called for.

The Puerto Rican worker is becoming increasingly more aware that the only alternative to solve the economic problems enveloping the island is to put an end to economic and political control by the United States. The aligning of the objective conditions and the organized forces within Puerto Rico have brought about the situation where the fight for better wages and working conditions and the fight for national liberation have finally found themselves on the same path with the same objective—the survival of the Puerto Rican people.