

## Puerto Ricans in the United States

# Migration to Misery

At least two million Puerto Ricans reside in the United States, more than 40% of the Puerto Rican nation. The majority stay within their own community; like Blacks, Asians, Chicanos, and Native Americans, they exist on the fringes of social, economic and political life in the United States.

While there are Puerto Rican communities in locations like the Mid-West, New England, Florida, Hawaii, California, the South and Southwestern U.S., most Puerto Ricans live in the large urban areas of New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, with 1.2 million living in New York City itself.

Here they are subjected to substandard living conditions, in migrant labor camps or in urban slums; substandard health care; racist and inadequate education; the worst, lowest-paying jobs with the worst working conditions of any nation or ethnic group; rampant unemployment and the problems of drugs and alcoholism which result from a marginal existence.

The Puerto Ricans who migrated to the United States did not do so voluntarily. They were uprooted by the economic, military and political ambitions of a colonial power, and were forced to become part of the labor force of that power. Of course, using its own naval vessels to transport Puerto Ricans to this country, the U.S. helped the migration along.

The rapid industrialization of Puerto Rico's previously agricultural economy which occurred as a result of Operation Bootstrap — an economic plan that brought United States

industry to the island using attractions of tax exemption and no minimum wage — did not provide the thousands of jobs it promised to the displaced Puerto Rican agricultural worker.

The high rate of unemployment and the high cost of living caused the heavy influx of Puerto Rican workers to the mainland in search of employment. Today, unemployment in Puerto Rico has reached 30% and many Puerto Ricans come to cities along the East Coast to find jobs.

But, for the most part, this desire is frustrated. Half of the fortunate that become employed earn less than \$100 a week. More than half the Puerto Ricans that live in New York have incomes of less than \$4,000 a year, below the official "poverty level."

In New York, the majority of Puerto Rican workers are employed by the light manufacturing (mainly garment) industries (as machine operators and seamstresses). The rest primarily work in service-related fields, while the unemployment rate for Puerto Ricans in New York is at 25%. (Although for specific sectors, it is much higher: in an article in the *New York Times* of Nov. 25, 1973, a representative of the National Congress of Puerto Rican Veterans was quoted as saying that more than 60% of Puerto Rican Vietnam Veterans are unemployed in New York City).

In other Eastern cities, such as Chicago, Hoboken, New Jersey, and Hartford, Connecticut, Puerto Ricans form a higher percentage of the population than those in New York, but





information concerning these Puerto Ricans is not as available. We know that unemployment rates are high: the total unemployment rate for Puerto Ricans in the U.S. ranges between 25% and 30%, and in Camden, New Jersey, it is at 50%.

Of all Puerto Ricans not active in the U.S. workforce, half are mothers on welfare. The Puerto Rican woman worker has the most menial, lowest-paying jobs, and like other Third World women, is "the last to be hired and the first to be fired." Of all employed Puerto Ricans in the U.S., 58% are industrial workers, 35% do service or clerical work, and 5.5% are professionals (i.e. teachers, doctors, and lawyers, etc.) Besides these workers, some 30,000 agricultural workers come to U.S. farms each year. Here they work a 6-day week, 10-12 hours a day. They live in migrant camps often without sanitary facilities. There is no minimum wage, no overtime pay, no workman's compensation, and a worker can be fired for little or no reason. They are not consulted when contracts are written, nor are they represented when they are signed.

The Migration Division of the Dept. of Labor of Puerto Rico was formed in 1948 with the express purpose of negotiating and signing contracts with large U.S. growers, sending Puerto Ricans from the island to U.S. as migrant agricultural workers. Since that time the unemployment rate in Puerto Rico has doubled, and the influx of migrant workers has steadily increased.

The median age of the Puerto Rican population in New York is nineteen, compared to twenty-three for Blacks and thirty-five for Whites. (More than 66% of Puerto Rican migrants are under twenty-five years of age when they arrive in the U.S.) A study done in 1960 showed that 92.3% of all Puerto Ricans living in the U.S. above the age of fourteen were born in Puerto Rico. The U.S. General Census of 1970 indicated that 72% of all Puerto Ricans in the U.S. use Spanish as their main means of communication. Due to institutional racism and lack of bilingual programs, Puerto Ricans have the highest educational drop-out rate in the country.

Since 20,000 Puerto Ricans come to the U.S. every year, cultural ties with the island are strong. All Puerto Ricans have some degree of nationalist feeling and the desire to preserve their culture; and this works against assimilation. The majority of Puerto Rican workers are unskilled, and like other immigrant groups, have not entered into the mainstream of U.S. economic life. Instead, they remain a marginal element.

Voting patterns have shown that they are more concerned with political issues concerning Puerto Rico than those that affect the U.S. The status of the island is the most controversial question, both here and on the island. The Puerto Rican community has shown its concern with racism and oppression through the formation and activism of U.S. based Puerto Rican organizations, and the U.S. branches of organizations based on the island, such as the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization (Young Lords Party), Resistencia Puertorriquena, El Comite, Association of Agricultural Workers (ATA) and many other student, community and workers' groups.

The struggle which these organizations must wage takes many forms because, although the most blatant discrimination

and most brutal oppression takes physical forms (at the job or in the community) there are more subtle forms which the Puerto Rican faces on a day to day basis.

There is the continuous attempt at murdering Puerto Rican culture. This occurs basically through the schools, in which Puerto Rican youth are denied both the use of their language and the study of their culture and history.

That this process of cultural genocide alienates the Puerto Rican youth is obvious. Half of the Puerto Ricans attending school in this country drop out by the age of sixteen (and the drop-out rate gets worse and worse). Even those who do graduate usually face the prospect of a college-less career (those who "slip in" through open admissions in New York's college system find themselves totally unprepared to face the intellectual rigors of university life, with insufficient background in math and writing skills).

On the one hand, the schools, which one writer has said "play little more than a custodial function for blacks and Puerto Ricans" attempt to erase any sense of identity and culture in the young Puerto Rican and, on the other, almost as a result of this process, alienate the young person sufficiently to cripple all chances of earning.

The struggle of parents to control the education in their community (struggles such as that going on in New York's District One on the lower East Side) has taken on added political significance.

That same kind of struggle, as a result of those same kinds of conditions, continues to go on in many different areas of social functioning: health care, housing, governmental function, etc.

In all of these areas, as can be seen from spending time in any Puerto Rican neighborhood in the U.S., the government has shown a profound neglect and sense of ignorance, resulting in more and more spontaneous demonstrations of resistance, from marches and public meetings to outbursts of anger and frustration (such as the riots which occurred in cities from Boston, to Jersey City to Holyoke in the summer of 1973).

The government has responded to the people's response with police brutality and repression, everyday realities in the Puerto Rican community, which are on the rise as the Puerto Rican movement in the United States grows. Police intervene in political rallies and community demonstrations with little or no provocation (in fact, plainclothes provocateurs have been repeatedly identified as initiators of trouble in rallies and demonstrations).

The incidence of political arrests, most proven as frame-ups to discredit the movement, to frighten its members or to disrupt its work, has become more and more frequent. Cases such as those of Carlos Feliciano, Eduardo "Pancho" Cruz, Juan Otero, Martin Sostre and Pepe and Ruben, not to mention the four Nationalist Political Prisoners, all come to mind.

And yet, because that movement continues to grow in numbers and influence in the face of this repression, the resolution of the conflict — a life and death question for Puerto Ricans in this country — is not easily arrived at. Certainly, the struggle by Puerto Ricans for justice is likely to continue as long as the government continues to ignore their needs.