

# PUERTO RICO

## THE LAST COLONY

**N**ext year will mark the 100th anniversary of the U.S. armed forces' invasion of the island of Puerto Rico. Since the time of Christopher Columbus, Puerto Rico has remained under direct foreign domination—first under Spain and then under the U.S. Puerto Rico is one of the last colonies in the world today.

U.S. and Puerto Rican rulers maintain the fiction that the island's political status results from a 1952 bilateral pact called the *Estado Libre Asociado* (ELA, Free Associated State), between two sovereign governments. Still, the U.S. government reserves complete and unilateral control over the island. The U.S. Congress holds an absolute veto power over local legislation. The only legal form of currency is the U.S. dollar. All defense matters are deferred to the U.S. military, and all eligible males can be drafted. Although the island has a National Guard, it, like the National Guards of the fifty states of the U.S., falls under the jurisdiction of the Pentagon. Federal law enforcement is handled by the FBI. The federal courts carry out their functions strictly in the English language, despite the fact that roughly 80 percent of the population speaks only Spanish. In what is a hotly contested issue, the current official languages of the country are Spanish and English.

Puerto Ricans have been American citizens since the U.S. Congress imposed citizenship on all island residents in 1917. While residing in any state of the union, Puerto Ricans can exercise the same rights as any other citizen. But those living on the island are not allowed to vote in presidential elections or to elect senators or representatives to Congress. Additionally, the level of federal funds allocated to the island is frequently below that of any state in similar circumstances. Clearly, the relationship of Puerto Rico to the U.S. is that of a colony to its overlord. But since the word "colony" carries negative connotations, U.S. government documents refer to the island as the "Commonwealth of Puerto Rico."

Nevertheless, each of the chief political parties on the island will commemorate the 100 years of "American presence" in its own way. How each marks the anniversary will reflect its interpretation of what the political relationship of Puerto Rico with the United States should be.

Those who believe that Puerto Rico should become the fifty-first state of the U.S.—led by the *Partido Nuevo Progresista* (PNP, New Progressive Party)—will celebrate and exalt the virtues of the great American nation. They will thank such a powerful country which so generously has taken the people of Puerto Rico under its protection, leading them to economic progress and a stable democracy. Nonetheless, they will argue that Puerto Rico is in fact still a colony, and that Puerto Ricans are unable to exercise their full rights as U.S. citizens. This contradiction, they will contend, can only be resolved once Puerto Rico becomes the fifty-first state.

ELA supporters—especially politicians from the *Partido Popular Democrático* (PPD, Popular Democratic Party)—will also hold celebrations and praise the U.S. government and its people. They will claim that the current "partnership" between

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the island and the U.S. should continue, albeit with a few minor adjustments. They will request that the island be removed from the direct control of Congress so that the Puerto Rican government can impose tariffs on agricultural imports. They will also request that the island be granted parity with other states for the assignment of federal funds, and that special tax breaks to promote U.S. investment in Puerto Rico be preserved.

On the other hand, those who believe that Puerto Rico should be an independent republic will protest the anniversary. Represented by a variety of tiny political organizations, and dominated by the *Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño* (PIP, Puerto Rican Independentist Party), the *independentistas* will denounce the U.S. as a colonial oppressor. They will charge that the U.S. set up the current political arrangement to guarantee enormous profits for its multinational corporations at the expense of the Puerto Rican people. They will also accuse the U.S. of fostering an economic order in which the majority of the people have been forced to depend on U.S. welfare programs. Finally, they will denounce the U.S. government for using welfare to create a "psychological dependence" on the U.S. and thereby dissuade Puerto Ricans from seeking political separation from their colonial masters.

For nearly fifty years, the pro-commonwealth position held the allegiance of the island's majority. But in the 1990s, the status quo has lost ground to the pro-statehood forces. In a 1994 plebiscite, Puerto Ricans voted to preserve the present commonwealth status, but on only the slimmest of margins (with 49 percent of the vote) over the statehood option (which received 46 percent). More recently, Congress has decided to get into the act. In March 1997, a bipartisan bill sponsored by Rep. Don Young (R-Alaska) authorizing a federally sponsored plebiscite on Puerto Rico's status was approved 44 to 1 by the House Committee on Resources. It awaits final approval by the 105th Congress. The Puerto Rican Status Act will allow Puerto Ricans to vote in a 1998 referendum on the island's status. Puerto Rican voters will be faced with three choices: retain "commonwealth" status, choose U.S. statehood, or choose independence from the U.S. The act would create a twelve-year transition period to the new status—during which Puerto Ricans would vote on referenda twice more. Still, the act calls for Congress—rather than the Puerto Rican people—to be the judge of Puerto Rico's future. The proposed 1998 plebiscite will be nonbinding. Furthermore, Young's proposal would not free all political prisoners held in U.S. jails before the plebiscite, a condition Puerto Ricans view as necessary to yield a fair decision. Finally, the option of independence has two sub-options: a republic and a "free associated" republic. Young and his supporters make no attempt to distinguish how these two "independence" options are different.

A SOCIETY IN CRISIS

During the century of U.S. colonial rule, Puerto Rican society has changed massively. Puerto Rico ceased to be an agricultural econ-

omy in the 1950s. In 1993, more than 68 percent of workers were involved in manufacturing, services, government, or construction, and fewer than 3 percent were agricultural workers. Despite the U.S.-encouraged transformation in the economy, Puerto Rico remains a very poor country plagued by unemployment and low wages. The standard of living of the Puerto Rican working class, although among the highest in Latin America, remains significantly lower than that of the U.S. working class. In 1996, the average manufacturing wage was 60 percent of that paid in the U.S.—with many people earning the minimum wage—while in 1993, the per capita income was \$6,760.<sup>1</sup> GDP per capita in 1997 was \$7,670.<sup>2</sup> Puerto Rico's per capita income is one-third that of the United States and half that of Mississippi.<sup>3</sup> Although it is difficult to compare, the cost of living has been estimated to be 25 percent higher than that of the U.S.<sup>4</sup>

The capital-intensive nature of the economy's chief industry—pharmaceuticals—contributes to a long-term crisis of unemployment. To illustrate, an early 1990s expansion by Merck Sharpe and Dohme required a \$90 million investment to generate only 200 jobs. In 1994, the unemployment rate was 16 percent, according to government figures. It has not dropped below 10 percent since 1940. Unemployment has hovered around the 15 percent mark for many years, reaching as high as 23 percent in 1983. These are the official figures, which over time tend to significantly underestimate the number of unemployed because discouraged job seekers are dropped out of the statistics. The real rate is estimated at more than 30 percent, with many towns in the central regions of the island having unemployment rates as high as 75 percent.<sup>5</sup>

The combination of low wages, unemployment, and underemployment have forced a significant portion of the Puerto Rican population to rely on federal aid. There was a significant increase in the amount of federal aid received by Puerto Rico between 1970 and 1980, largely due to the food stamp program. However, the “generosity” of the federal government peaked in the early 1980s, the years in which the administration of Republican President Ronald Reagan implemented the first wave of significant cuts in social programs. By 1982, individuals were receiving approximately \$3 billion annually in federal transfers, which combined with other federal grants, amounted to 28 percent of Puerto Rico's GNP. In 1991, approximately 372,000 families had monthly earnings of less than \$500. More than 60 percent of families (480,000) received food stamps—with a family of four receiving approximately \$200 per month.<sup>6</sup>

Combined with poverty is the accelerated decline in the quality and extent of social services. Public hospitals are understaffed and overcrowded. The government's current plans to privatize dozens of public health clinics will only make matters worse. Private health care lies beyond the means of a large portion of the population, 60 percent of which lacks health insurance.<sup>7</sup> In spite of this chronic situation, Medicaid and Medicare are funded at lower levels than those of the U.S.—a clear illustration of the island's colonial oppression. What is more, Puerto Rico has the second highest per capita incidence of AIDS in the U.S. (after Washington, D.C.). A Harvard University projection predicts that by the end of the decade 50,000 residents of San Juan will be infected with the HIV virus, while more than 13,000 will have died.<sup>8</sup>

Education has deteriorated steadily over the past two decades. After many years of neglect, the government in 1991 earmarked \$115 million as part of a so-called school reform. However, most of the money was spent on building repair. A school system historically plagued by a lack of textbooks received a meager \$1.6 million (roughly \$2.60 per student) for books as part of the reform. The Department of Education itself estimates that

one half of all students leave school before the twelfth grade.<sup>9</sup>

The gap between the rich and the poor has widened over the past decade. While the upper classes display their sumptuous mansions, the working class is forced to cram into small substandard housing. In many parts of the island people do not have tap water or sewers, and live in shanties with limited electric power and overflowing latrines. The combination of poverty, alienation and lack of decent jobs has led directly to a steady decomposition of Puerto Rican society. The crime rate is higher than that of most U.S. cities, with the exception of Washington, D.C. Last year, approximately 1,000 people were murdered—a rate of roughly 28 murders per 100,000 inhabitants. Drug lords control whole neighborhoods which the police are afraid to enter.

In 1993, in an unprecedented action, the governor allowed the use of the National Guard to occupy public housing projects with the pretext of stamping out drug dealers. The outcome was a sharp increase in the numbers of murders as a result of territorial battles caused by the displaced gangs moving into areas controlled by rival gangs. However, the real losers have been the public housing residents. The National Guard and police frequently trample on residents' civil rights. Law-and-order politics has fueled a huge increase in the prison population, leaving prisons extremely overcrowded. In November 1991, nearly half of the 11,000 inmates went on strike, protesting physical and mental abuse by penal guards, and demanding medical treatment for the sick, especially the inmates infected with the AIDS virus. It is estimated that about 50 percent of inmates have the AIDS virus and receive little treatment.<sup>10</sup>

#### WHY THE U.S. HAS HELD ONTO ITS COLONY

Despite the terrible conditions in which the 3.8 million Puerto Ricans on the island live, Puerto Rico provides great economic and military advantages to the U.S. ruling class. The U.S. was, in the words of Pedro Albizu Campos, founder of Puerto Rico's modern independence movement in the 1930s, “interested in the cage, not the birds.”<sup>11</sup> Changes in the U.S. economic strategy for penetrating Latin America have diminished Puerto Rico's economic role somewhat. But Puerto Rico's military importance to the Pentagon remains as strong as ever.

U.S. capital—with help from its island-based allies—used Puerto Rico as a laboratory to test policies for economic penetration of Latin America and the Caribbean. In the first forty years of this century, Puerto Rico served primarily as a source of cheap sugar. In the 1940s and 1950s, Puerto Rico embarked on “Operation Bootstrap,” converting the island into an export-processing zone for the assembly of finished manufactured products for U.S. firms. In many ways, “Operation Bootstrap” represented the first application of the *maquiladora* strategy which U.S. business uses to a great extent today in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean. Labor-intensive production in the 1950s gave way to heavy industry (oil refining and petrochemicals) in the 1960s and early 1970s. In the 1980s and 1990s, electronics and pharmaceuticals took over. As the *maquiladora* industrial strategy Puerto Rico pioneered is exported to other nations in the Caribbean and Latin America, Puerto Rico's rulers have tried to reposition the island as a “promoter, financier, and central complementary production site for a growing number of U.S. manufacturing, financial and service companies located in other countries in the region.”<sup>12</sup> At each stage an economic crisis opened the way to new kinds of industrial incentives to attract capital in an attempt to stabilize the economy.

U.S. business has reaped substantial profits from Puerto Rico. But recently, the island has lost its “comparative advantage” in manufacturing to other Latin American economies, particularly

Mexico. The 1995 manufacturing GDP is estimated to be \$17.7 billion, a fraction of Mexico's \$205 billion. Although Puerto Rico's population ranks as the seventeenth in Latin America, its 1992 GDP (\$39.5 billion) was the eighth largest in the region. It was the fourth largest exporter behind Mexico, Brazil, and Venezuela, and also the fourth largest importer.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, most of this trade takes place with the U.S. In 1993, Puerto Rico's commercial exchange with the U.S. accounted for 86 percent of exports and 69 percent of imports. Today, Puerto Rico is the pharmaceutical capital of the world. It supplies close to 25 percent of world demand for drugs and 50 percent of U.S. pharmaceutical imports.<sup>14</sup>

U.S. bosses' perceptions of the island's economic significance have varied throughout the twentieth century, but U.S. generals have always recognized its military importance. Puerto Rico's strategic position in the Caribbean makes it indispensable (1) in the "defense" of the Panama Canal and its maritime access; (2) as an operations base for military intervention in the Caribbean—the invasions of the Dominican Republic (1965), Grenada (1983) and Haiti (1994) were rehearsed and launched from Puerto Rican territory; (3) as a control center for the naval activities and "protection" of the maritime routes of the South Atlantic (extending to the coast of Africa).<sup>15</sup> On an island measuring only 100 miles by 35 miles are seven military bases, one of which is among the largest naval bases in the world. Named Roosevelt Roads, it extends through 37,000 acres of land and holds three bays frequented by nuclear submarines.

In sum, Puerto Rico is of great strategic military importance to the U.S. Moreover, American investment in the island is too large for the U.S. ruling class to be willing to risk losing it to political unrest and social convulsion. Although some sectors of the American ruling class lean toward incorporating Puerto Rico as a state, most of it would rather not tinker with the island's political status.

#### THE CRISIS OF PUERTO RICAN POLITICS

Despite Puerto Rico's benefits to the U.S. ruling class, the extent of today's economic and social crisis puts in doubt the survival of the ELA. For years, the ELA's chief backer, the PPD, based its appeal on its ability to deliver U.S. investment and U.S. government spending. U.S. government tax incentives encouraged firms to locate on the island. But when President Clinton signed the 1996 bill raising the minimum wage, he eliminated the decades-old Section 936 of the Internal Revenue Service code which granted tax breaks to many American businesses operating on the island. In addition, on June 28, 1996, Congress notified the Puerto Rican legislature that it would continue to make all major decisions for Puerto Rico while still guaranteeing federal funding to the Puerto Rican government as with any other state of the union. None of the major parties (PPD, PNP, PIP) has a solution, and not surprisingly their respective economic programs have increasingly come to resemble each other's.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1996 elections, the PIP's vote was less than 4 percent, compared to 51 percent for the PNP and 44 percent for the PPD. With the PPD adrift and the PIP too small and politically ill-equipped to expand its influence, the conservative PNP initially benefited from the social crisis. For the first time ever in the 1996 elections, it gained more than 50 percent of the vote. After the elections, PNP governor Pedro Roselló expanded his attacks on the working class to levels that eventually have led to a concerted response by the unions.

Roselló's attempt to privatize the state-run phone company provoked a one-day general strike in October 1997. More than 150,000 workers surrounded the Capitol building in San Juan, paralyzing the island for a day. At the University of Puerto Rico

hundreds of students drove the state police off campus.<sup>17</sup> The general strike was larger than the 1990 general strike—the first in Puerto Rican history—which stopped a similar privatization scheme pushed by the PPD government. In addition, the government plans to sell more than 100 public clinics, and to institute a local version of a government-sponsored health maintenance organization. But Roselló miscalculated in taking on the whole working class at once. The result was generalized anger and a willingness by workers to sidestep their ideological differences (i.e., regarding the island's political status) and to close ranks against the bosses. In 1997, the level of anger and political generalization was higher than in 1990. Calls for a five-day general strike resounded among the population. The potential for rebuilding the labor movement is clear.

Today, the PNP is finding it more difficult to credibly sell its statehood solution. In the 1970s, in particular after the advent of food stamps, the PNP promised that "statehood is for the poor"—guaranteeing a bonanza of federal aid to the poor as well as preserving the Spanish language and Puerto Rican culture. However, the era of expansion in social programs is over. Both Clinton and the Republicans are dismantling the social safety net that has been in place since the 1930s.<sup>18</sup>

#### THE PUZZLING LACK OF SUPPORT FOR INDEPENDENCE

From the breakup of the former Soviet Union to the emergence of new states in Africa, a worldwide surge in nationalist movements and the creation of new independent countries characterizes the current political epoch. Yet paradoxically, Puerto Ricans have expressed very little interest in demanding a separate independent state.

It is misleading to characterize the contemporary extent of Puerto Rican support for independence exclusively on low support for the PIP in the most recent election. Historically, a portion of the *independentista* movement has abstained from electoral politics as a matter of principle. Furthermore, a fraction of PIP supporters voted for the PPD believing that a victory of the PPD would at least contain the advance of the pro-statehood forces. Nonetheless, those supporting independence remain a small if significant and vocal minority.

How can this lack of support for Puerto Rican independence be explained? The usual *independentista* reply emphasizes the impact of U.S. political persecution and economic dependence on the U.S. While the importance of these factors must not be underestimated, they are not decisive. Repression did not stop the people of Vietnam from defeating the mighty U.S. military apparatus in the 1970s, or the Cuban and Nicaraguan masses from overthrowing the dictators Fulgencio Batista and Anastasio Somoza. Both Batista and Somoza received full U.S. government backing until their last minute in power.

Likewise, the issue of economic dependence is distorted. The notion that Puerto Ricans have fallen down a spiral of ever-increasing dependence on federal assistance, making them eternal hostages of colonial politicians, may be popular wisdom, but it does not correspond to reality. The truth is that the largest fraction of federal money currently paid to individuals takes place as earned transfers, i.e., money that is owed to Puerto Ricans by the federal government because of previously rendered services or previous payments. Under this category fall Social Security and veterans' pensions. Thus while in 1980 earned transfers made up 57 percent of federal transfers, in 1990 they were 60 percent, and by 1993 they had reached 70 percent.<sup>19</sup> This is hardly a picture of a steadily increasing economic dependence on federal grants. Intense poverty has forced many on the island to rely on federal entitlements such as food stamps. Yet the bulk of the payments received by

individuals every year is simply earned income and not a pacifier conspiratorially designed to promote political subservience.

The *independentistas*' "common sense" can't explain why Puerto Ricans have failed to rally to the cause of independence. A genuine explanation must look elsewhere—in particular to the political strategy opponents of U.S. imperialism have pursued. The independence movement has never been able to convince Puerto Ricans what they would gain from an independent state.

Historically, those who propose that Puerto Ricans will be emancipated simply by securing political independence from the U.S. have dominated the political debate and controlled the main organizations of resistance against American imperialism. Their political project, regardless of their particular rhetoric, hinges on the ability of the island to survive in the international market by making efficient use of human resources (i.e., workers and technicians) and the further development of an economic infrastructure which will make use of trade barriers, pacts, and other state powers to promote investment in the economic sectors perceived as "strategic." Typical of this reasoning is the statement by Juan Mari Bras, a long-standing and respected *independentista*, who once was the top leader of the now defunct Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP), and who currently leads the *Congreso Nacional Hostosiano* (a broad nationalist front):

...there is sufficient development of skilled workers, professionals, technology, and there is sufficient infrastructure established in Puerto Rico to turn us into a true production center of many economic aspects, for example: chemical industry, pharmaceutical industry, tuna industry. In Mayagüez we produce 90 percent of the tuna consumed in the U.S.

All that Puerto Rico produces is that which will guarantee that in an open market Puerto Rico will be competitive. The dependence on the U.S. is detrimental to this competitiveness and to our ability to sell to all countries of the world and to buy from anyone at our convenience, including the North Americans.<sup>20</sup>

This political program has a particular class perspective which sees the bulk of the Puerto Rican population as useful tools in the fight for international markets. Mari Bras, the leadership of the PIP, and other pro-independence activists going as far back as the 1930s belong to a group of middle-class intellectuals and professionals who aspire to be part of a new Puerto Rican ruling class. For Puerto Rican workers, the drive for international "competitiveness" translates into longer working hours, speed-ups, low wages, and limited benefits. Furthermore, it is extremely naive to believe that Puerto Rico can compete on equal terms with economic powerhouses such as the U.S., Japan, and the Western European economies. These economies' extensive sources of capital and vast technological infrastructures would put the small Puerto Rican economy at a monumental disadvantage. It is precisely under such conditions in which the new rulers of a free Puerto Rico, even if they dislike it, would be forced to resort to an intensification of the exploitation of the Puerto Rican working class. This is the only lever that they can truly control.

Since the *independentista* movement focuses on political independence at the expense of social issues, it cannot address the everyday concerns of the one million Puerto Rican workers on the island. The PIP publicly declares that it will welcome the day when food stamps are taken away from Puerto Ricans because then Puerto Ricans will automatically be compelled to support independence. But instead of bringing the Puerto Rican masses closer to the struggle against U.S. imperialism, this kind of

rhetoric scares them away with a message that clearly states, "We hope you starve." What is more, the *independentistas* have no answer to the mass of Puerto Ricans who believe that they will lose whatever small advantages they perceive from partial U.S. citizenship. Free migration between the island and the U.S. will end. Not only will this increase the likelihood that Puerto Ricans will share in immigration harassment that other Latin Americans face, but it threatens to cut off links with the nearly 42 percent of the Puerto Rican nation that lives in the U.S.

In *independentista* politics, nation comes first, and any other issues such as trade unionism, as well as concerns regarding racism, sexism, and gay oppression, are considered "divisive" and "distracting." Some *independentistas* have even joined right-wing politicians in racist scapegoating of poor Dominican immigrants to the island. In fairness, not all *independentistas* are so narrowly focused on nationalist politics. Even Mari Bras and many of his ex-comrades in the PSP were involved in many social struggles. During the late 1960s and up to the mid-1970s, when the level of class struggle reached a high pitch, it was politically suicidal for nationalists to ignore struggles such as land squatting, strikes, and battles of college students against the Vietnam War and the ROTC. But as these struggles subsided in the late 1970s and 1980s, it became evident that the nationalist project was always at the center of their strategy.

#### THE TWIN LEGACIES OF THE LABOR MOVEMENT AND THE STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE

The separation of the struggle for independence from the working-class struggle can be traced to the eve of the American invasion. At the time of the invasion, the Puerto Rican economy was slowly evolving in an agrarian capitalist direction. During the 19th century, Spain's mercantilism suffocated Puerto Rico's economy. This led to the slow development of a native class of landowners—the *hacendados*—who controlled agricultural production but were subordinated to merchants and government bureaucrats of Spanish origin.<sup>21</sup> Eventually, the *hacendados* were able to negotiate with the Spanish government a form of autonomy that was cut short by the American invasion.

Although there was minor local resistance to the invasion, the majority of the population did not lift a finger to defend the much-hated Spanish government. The *hacendados* saw as a blessing the opportunity to enter the American market free of trade restrictions. However, their illusions in the U.S. were soon



1997 general strike against privatization of the Puerto Rican telephone company

shattered. Their new colonial masters proceeded to stack laws and local administration to promote American acquisition of massive amounts of land for sugar cane production. The old *hacendado* class was elbowed out of the economy. It lost its land and its economic dominance. By 1910, sugar was king.

Out of necessity, the *hacendado* class nurtured a weak and hesitant nationalism. In the latter period of Spanish rule, the *hacendados* demanded autonomy rather than independence from Spain. After 1904, they organized themselves in the *Partido Unión* (PU, Union Party). In 1913, they incorporated an equivocal demand for independence in the PU's program.

The sugar corporations' monopolistic capitalist development destroyed the old *hacienda* system. As a result, thousands of people were removed from the lands in which they lived and cultivated as a new agricultural working class was formed. In the cities, a small urban working class of cigar makers, printers, and carpenters began to form. These dramatic transformations led to the development of a triangular political conflict between the old *hacendado* class, the new working class, and the colonial ruling class. U.S. colonialists received aid from its local junior partners organized in the *Partido Republicano* (PR, Republican Party). The Republicans wanted Puerto Rico to be annexed to the U.S. as a state.

During the first two decades of American domination, the *hacendados* rabidly confronted the working class. Feeling caught between a working class that threatened their interests and a very powerful colonial master that was eroding their economic dominance, the *hacendados* developed a pathetic vision of national independence through which they hoped to put workers in their place. Thus, in 1919, the PU president threatened labor leader Santiago Iglesias Pantín: "I guarantee you that if Puerto Rico were free and owner of its destiny... I would deport you for being so pernicious, for corrupting the public conscience."<sup>22</sup> Needless to say, the young, inexperienced, and weakly organized working class developed a mistrust toward any *hacendado* politician's proposals for independence. Moreover, the workers sought to take advantage of U.S.-guaranteed rights (e.g., the right to form unions, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly) which Spain had denied.

Nevertheless, the sugar corporations used their influence over the local administration to impose conditions that made a mockery of those rights. Strikes and rallies were broken. Workers were beaten and arrested. Some were killed. Heavily influenced by both liberal and anarcho-syndicalist ideas popular in Spain at the time, many of the leaders of the Puerto Rican working class tended to rely on appeals to the federal government in Washington to force the local politicians to respect the laws and constitution of the U.S. In the political climate of absolutism prevalent in Spain at the turn of the century, workers influenced by anarcho-syndicalist ideas perceived in the American republic a progressive force because of the additional room to maneuver that bourgeois democracy afforded.

In 1899 a group of workers simultaneously founded the *Federación Libre de Trabajadores* (FLT, Free Federation of Labor) and the *Partido Socialista Obrero* (POS, Socialist Labor Party). Because of political repression, the FLT sought the backing of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) to support it against the arbitrariness of local politicians. AFL President Samuel Gompers recruited FLT leader Pantín as the AFL's main organizer in Puerto Rico and Cuba. Gompers did not conceive his support so much in terms of class solidarity. Rather, he feared that if conditions didn't improve in Puerto Rico, Puerto Rican workers would migrate to the U.S. and thus compete for jobs with American workers.<sup>23</sup> Seven years after the FLT's and POS's founding, the POS existed only on paper and the FLT also was weakened. But a mid-1910s surge in class struggle revived the

FLT and found political expression around a relaunched Socialist Party (PS) in 1915.

For a brief moment in the 1930s, the working-class and anti-imperialist movements joined forces. In 1930, a revitalized *Partido Nacionalista* (PN, Nationalist Party), led by Pedro Albizu Campos, launched militant resistance to U.S. domination. The PN was the first party to propose armed struggle as a means for obtaining independence from the U.S. However, its nationalist politics and its middle-class composition and orientation proved to be a great obstacle in its aim of leading the Puerto Rican masses to independence. The Nationalists contended that the poverty and abuse suffered by the bulk of the population could be ended simply by expelling the American invader and founding a republic which could impose trade tariffs, redistribute land, and direct foreign investment into economic areas deemed critical for the country's development. In spite of its sympathies towards workers, the PN leadership did not see workers as central to its struggle.<sup>24</sup>

The rise of the Nationalist Party coincided with the Socialist Party's decline. By the early 1930s, the Socialist Party had become a bureaucratic, undemocratic organization completely identified with the interests of the sugar corporations. The leadership of the FLT had long ceased to fight for workers' rights, especially those of the unskilled sugar cane workers. In 1932, the Socialist Party entered a coalition with the pro-statehood Republican Party. This took place at the time of the Great Depression which hit the Puerto Rican population particularly hard. Within this context of starvation wages and the PS's betrayal of the working class, the Nationalists' principled and courageous opposition to U.S. imperialism (and to the sugar corporations) gained popular support.

In 1934 a major sugar cane workers strike—called as much against the FLT's rotten compromises as against the sugar corporations—spread all over the island. The striking workers asked Albizu Campos to lead the strike. Albizu Campos and the PN wholeheartedly supported the strike and went from town to town speaking to thousands of workers. The PN even attempted to found an alternative union. Headed by a dentist, this short-lived union was conceived more like a small business—and accordingly called itself the Puerto Rican Workers Association, Inc.<sup>25</sup> Yet massive repression at the hands of the sugar corporations and the colonial administration defeated the strike.

After the strike, Albizu Campos never attempted to relate to the working class again. This position proved to be a costly mistake. When the U.S.-appointed governor of the island, General Blanton Winship, undertook a repressive campaign to halt nationalist influence, the Nationalists were isolated. In 1937, colonial police massacred twenty unarmed nationalists during a demonstration in Ponce. Subsequently, Albizu Campos and other Nationalist leaders were arrested and imprisoned. The PN never recovered from these events.

#### PLAYING THE POPULIST CARD

With the Socialist Party having lost its credibility and the Nationalist Party disabled by political repression, a political vacuum opened up. The newly founded Popular Democratic Party (PPD), led by Luis Muñoz Marín, filled that vacuum in 1940. Intellectuals, professionals, and middle-class liberals whose politics could be traced back to those of the old PU filled the PPD's leadership.<sup>26</sup> The PPD quickly appropriated many of the demands of the Socialist and Nationalist parties. It attacked the monopoly of power of the sugar corporations. It spoke against the extreme poverty of the Puerto Rican masses. And it initially put forward in its program the goal of independence. The populist program aimed to apply the provisions of the U.S. New Deal to Puerto Rico, even against the interests of the sugar corporations. The U.S. was

# Puerto Ricans in the U.S.

**A**lmost half a million Puerto Ricans left the island in the 1950s. Most of them migrated to New York.<sup>1</sup> Today, while 3.8 million Puerto Ricans reside on the island, another 2.7 million live throughout the U.S. Most Puerto Ricans who came to the U.S. did not find the improved living standards they sought. Puerto Ricans are the poorest ethnic group in the U.S. On measures such as unemployment rates, the proportion living below the poverty line, the school dropout rate, and other social indicators, Puerto Ricans rank lower than African Americans and most other Latino immigrants, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.<sup>2</sup>

Many Puerto Rican nationalists on the island can appreciate the racism and poverty their fellow Puerto Ricans suffer in the U.S. But their political program doesn't relate to that reality. Their emphasis on "the nation"—in particular, the longed-for Puerto Rican citizenship—makes political orphans out of the Puerto Ricans living in

the U.S. Instead of calling for the uninterrupted and unobstructed movement of their people between the U.S. and the island, many *independentistas* demand their own immigration control apparatus. They narrow-mindedly propose to force Puerto Ricans in the U.S. to decide whether they will be Puerto Ricans or Americans. Then, when significant numbers of U.S.-raised Puerto Ricans return to the island, some nationalists meet them with hostility



Protest at the Statue of Liberty in 1977

and charges of "not being Puerto Rican enough," especially because they have difficulty speaking Spanish. Instead of building bridges for an extension of the struggle, narrow nationalism severs the links between both communities.

Yet the connection between Puerto Rico's colonial situation and the living conditions of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. is hard to avoid. In fact, U.S.-resident Puerto Ricans have bravely fought back against these conditions. The Young Lords Party of the early 1970s, founded in Chicago and modeled after the Black Panthers, provided a great source of inspiration—both in the U.S. and on the island.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See F.L. Rivera-Batiz and C.E. Santiago, *Island Paradox: Puerto Rico in the 1990s* (Russell Sage Foundation, 1996), pp. 126-151.

<sup>2</sup> See F.L. Rivera-Batiz and C. Santiago, *Puerto Ricans in the United States: A Changing Reality* (The National Puerto Rican Coalition, 1994), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> For an account of what the Young Lords stood for, see Young Lords Party and M. Abramson, *Palante: Young Lords Party* (McGraw-Hill, 1971).

willing to sacrifice those interests for the sake of political stability, particularly during World War II. Significantly, the PPD's initial support for independence highlights the crisis of credibility that beset the traditional ruling-class parties in this period. New struggles against depression conditions created the best chance since the invasion for the merging of the struggle against imperialism with workers' economic and social struggles.

The Communist Party of Puerto Rico (PCPR), founded in 1934, moved swiftly to gain influence within the working class and other social movements, like those of land squatters and the unemployed. The PCPR's militants participated in the strike of 1934. The labor movement in Puerto Rico paralleled the labor movement in the U.S., where the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) organized mass industrial unions, breaking with the AFL's policy of organizing workers by craft. Hundreds of thousands of dock workers from all parts of the island joined unions affiliated to the CIO in 1938. In that same year, the dock workers staged a strike that marked one of the most successful episodes in the history of the Puerto Rican labor movement. CIO unions' and American sailors' solidarity helped win the strike. American sailors refused to let steam from their ships operate the machinery scabs could use to unload struck ships' cargo.<sup>27</sup> The PCPR played a major role in the strike. Later it helped spearhead the formation of a new workers' federation, the *Confederación General de Trabajadores* (CGT, General Confederation of Workers), which posed a militant alternative to the FLT.

A mood of rebellion against the old political forces, the grip of the sugar corporations, poverty, and World War II-caused scarcity swept the island in the early 1940s. In this context of instability, with the memory of the Nationalist Party's calls for armed insurrection still fresh, Muñoz Marín and his PPD became an alternative for the U.S. ruling class. The PPD's populist policies resembled those of other Latin American governments of the period (e.g., Cárdenas in Mexico, Betancourt in Venezuela). It

proposed a Keynesian program of government spending to subsidize the building of the island's economic infrastructure. Implementing Roosevelt's New Deal policies in Puerto Rico, Muñoz Marín and the PPD presided over the building of roads, hospitals, schools, and the expansion of the utilities.

In the second half of the 1940s, Muñoz Marín embarked on a three-pronged strategy for industrialization of the island. First, the PPD made it irresistible for U.S. corporations to operate on the island by granting them full tax exemption.<sup>28</sup> Given the low wages prevalent in Puerto Rico at the time, this incentive turned out to be very tempting for labor-intensive U.S. businesses. Second, the government, arguing that underdevelopment and overpopulation caused Puerto Rican economic problems, "unofficially" sponsored the migration of thousands of Puerto Ricans to the U.S. In one of its most obscene projections, the PPD wanted to ship out as many as one million workers, unemployed, or former peasants (out of a population of barely two million) over a period of ten years.<sup>29</sup> Third, a massive sterilization campaign—fully supported by the U.S. government—was undertaken. By 1981, 32.5 percent of all Puerto Rican women aged 15 to 49 were sterilized. In terms of those women more likely to be sexually active (either married or cohabiting), 48.8 percent were sterilized.<sup>30</sup>

Muñoz Marín's project required political stability and the acquiescence of the working class. In this respect, both the nationalists and any independent workers movement represented a threat. While the government contained the nationalists with selective repression, the workers movement required a different approach. After consolidating his power, Muñoz Marín began to erode the power of the CGT through a combination of co-optation of part of the leadership and repression of the sector that resisted this manipulation. A section of the CGT leadership, committed independence supporters and socialists, were forced to split from the CGT. They formed another feder-

ation (called CGT-*Auténtica*) which collapsed after years of harassment and repression. Muñoz Marín himself told the labor leaders that unless they cooperated they “would be crushed like roaches.”<sup>31</sup> The remains of the original CGT eventually split into three additional factions, fragmenting the organized working class. For a long time, the fragmented working class was incapable of posing any resistance to the local bosses’ demands for cooperation or U.S. imperialism.

The PCPR—the one political force which might have put up an organized resistance to state co-optation of the labor movement—instead supported the PPD! The PCPR, following Stalin’s policy of seeking alliances with “progressive” capitalists, gave all its support to the government of Muñoz Marín. This was a fatal mistake, because the political situation in Puerto Rico was up for grabs in 1940. The old PS was discredited. The working class showed a new militancy. The other bourgeois parties were in disarray. The PPD’s 1940 electoral victory—with only 38 percent of the vote<sup>32</sup>—was hardly a sign of new political stability. By refusing to provide open political leadership within the CGT in the critical period between 1940 and 1944, and worse, by endorsing the PPD, the PCPR disarmed itself politically. By 1944, the PCPR almost dissolved itself into the PPD.<sup>33</sup> The historic opportunity to influence the Puerto Rican working class—to combine the fight against imperialism with the working class struggle—was squandered. One of the PCPR’s most prominent leaders, César Andreu Iglesias, in 1951 sharply criticized the politics of the party in this period:

[The Party] shifted from political action to purely trade unionist action...The Party leadership lost its historical perspective. The Party, in fact, began to dissolve itself in the mass movements. During this period grew the national struggle for independence. The profound economic crisis threw thousands of unemployed workers into the streets. New trade union organizations arose. The workers turned their backs on the yellow socialist leaders... The historical bourgeois parties, including the old colonial Socialist Party, rotten, fell bankrupt. The masses were seeking a way out. The trade union struggle, pure and simple, was not enough. But such was the only way out which, in practice, but for a few sporadic statements, the communists offered them. It was the new Popular Party [PPD] which offered a concrete political way out in the short term. The leadership of the Popular Party channeled the anger of the masses toward the political struggle.<sup>34</sup>

In missing this opportunity, the PCPR paved the way for its demise. It became politically irrelevant and isolated. Its political confusion, the repressive policies of Muñoz Marín, and the 1950s McCarthyite witch-hunts led to its disintegration.

#### “OPERATION BOOTSTRAP”

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Puerto Rico was immersed in a profound industrial transformation. The PPD’s strategies, together with the post-war boom, allowed for a succession of labor-intensive industries to open in Puerto Rico. The island was industrialized under the economic program termed “Operation Bootstrap.” Instead of attempting to break with the imperial power, the Puerto Rican ruling class became subservient to the economic and political interests of U.S. capital. Thus, in 1946, the PPD eliminated independence from its political program. This change prompted the PPD’s most liberal faction to split and found the PIP in the same year. Committed to attaining independence through parliamentary pressure, the PIP went on to become the “respectable” pro-independence party as opposed to the “violent” PN. Its social base was the middle class, intellectuals, small farmers and merchants.<sup>35</sup>

From 1948 onwards, the PPD became engaged in the process of justifying the colonial situation both to the Puerto Rican masses and to the international community. These efforts culminated in the enactment of the ELA in 1952. This political formula defined the relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico in terms that were practically identical to those contained in the congressional Jones Act that governed U.S. relations with Puerto Rico between 1917 and 1952. The only major difference was that Puerto Ricans were allowed to draft and vote on a constitution that was subject to the veto of the U.S. Congress. U.S. authorities knew they were simply repackaging Puerto Rico’s colonial status. In 1950, the U.S. Congressional and Administrative Service reported that the bill establishing the ELA “would not change Puerto Rico’s fundamental political, social and economic relationship to the United States.”<sup>36</sup> The vote in favor of the ELA implied that Puerto Ricans were giving consent to the continuation of the colonial situation, and therefore legitimizing it both at home and abroad.

Nevertheless, the PPD did not have an easy time pushing the ELA on Puerto Ricans. In 1950 the Nationalist Party led an unsuccessful armed uprising. The Nationalists briefly held Jayuya, a town in the central region of the island, before U.S. and Puerto Rican authorities retook it. In crushing the revolt, the U.S. Air Force actually bombed Jayuya. The failed revolt resulted in severe repression of both the nationalists and the *independentista* movement in general. Politically and socially isolated, the nationalist insurrection, although courageous, lacked broad popular support. Its failure dealt the final blow to the PN.<sup>37</sup>

#### RISE AND FALL OF THE NEW INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT

The PPD maintained hegemony in island politics until the second half of the 1960s, when it faced challenges from the pro-statehood right and from a new independence movement invigorated by the 1959 Cuban revolution. The new pro-statehood party, the PNP, was formed from the worn-out Statehood Republican Party (PER) to campaign for statehood in a 1967 plebiscite on the political status of Puerto Rico. In that plebiscite, Puerto Rican voters were asked to decide among independence, ELA, and statehood. The whole pro-independence movement and the PER boycotted the vote. In the end, the ELA won 60 percent of the vote, with 39 percent opting for statehood. The pro-statehood forces that participated in the plebiscite founded the PNP, which proceeded to win the gubernatorial elections in 1968.<sup>38</sup> Subsequent evidence has questioned the validity of the 1967 plebiscite and the 1968 elections. In 1991, the Puerto Rican press made public a 1978 memorandum sent to a high-ranking official of the U.S. National Security Council detailing repression and harassment of the Puerto Rican pro-independence movement at the hands of the FBI.<sup>39</sup>

The FBI stepped up its intervention in Puerto Rico because politics on the ground shifted to the pro-independence left in the 1960s. In 1959, a group of radical students and intellectuals inspired by the Cuban revolution and disillusioned with the PIP founded the *Movimiento Pro Independencia* (MPI, Pro-Independence Movement).<sup>40</sup> The MPI’s politics were nationalist. Its leaders sought Puerto Rico’s independence by any means necessary. The MPI and its student supporters in the *Federación de Estudiantes Pro Independencia* (FUPI, Federation of Students for Independence, founded in 1956<sup>41</sup>) formed a radical wing of the pro-independence movement, which related to the island’s social struggles. During the late 1960s and the early 1970s, the University of Puerto Rico was the scene of militant student actions against the military draft and the ROTC. A shortage of housing forced hundreds of squatters to invade and settle on government and private lands. In the island towns of Culebra and Vieques people

waged a bitter fight to get the U.S. Navy off their land. Then after 1972 the economy began to collapse. Unemployment rose and thousands of workers went on strike. In this political climate, the militants of the MPI decided to found the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP) in 1971.<sup>42</sup> Even the PIP underwent a radicalization of its rank and file when significant numbers of young militants joined the party. In 1971, a new PIP leadership introduced a social democratic program that called for independence, socialism, and democracy.<sup>43</sup> Its slogan was “up with the downtrodden.”

The PIP had high expectations for the 1972 elections. But following a disappointing showing, it went into an internal crisis and began moving to the right. By the 1976 elections it had shifted its slogan into a more traditionally nationalist direction: “It’s time that what is ours becomes ours.”<sup>44</sup> The PSP itself grew fast as a result of its involvement in the social struggles of the early 1970s. It managed to gain influence in several unions and in the student movement. However, from its origin, two currents coexisted within it. One envisioned a popular front based on a cross-class alliance of those sectors of society interested in fighting for independence. This current was led by intellectuals and middle-class individuals. The other current understood that independence was only attainable through the organized force of the working class. These two currents coexisted while the level of class struggle remained high. As soon as the class struggle declined after 1976, their differences became obvious. The PSP gradually began to melt away, until finally, in 1993, it announced to the world what had been a fact for several years. The PSP no longer existed.

The result has been the generation of a huge political vacuum that no political organization has been able to fill. In practical terms, this has meant that a series of local struggles have erupted in isolation of each other throughout the 1990s.

#### SOCIALISTS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR A FREE PUERTO RICO

The notion of socialism common on the Puerto Rican left is an eclectic—and elastic—concept in which nationalism is combined with elements of a Marxist analysis. The idea of socialist revolution is cloudy, and is frequently conceived of in terms of some sort of guerrilla struggle. This conception can give rise to illusions regarding individual terrorism. For most of the Puerto Rican left, the working class is not the central actor. Rather, workers are viewed as one progressive component of a broad nationalist front. The PCPR’s “popular front” politics, which betrayed the struggle against imperialism in the 1940s, were widely despised in nationalist circles. But the same type of cross-class politics found expression in the popular movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Neither Marx nor Lenin thought about the struggle for self-determination or for socialism in those terms. In the classical Marxist view, international working-class revolution is the basis for the liberation of the people of one country from the oppression by the ruling class of another more powerful country. The old Marxist battlecry “workers of all countries unite” is not a catchy phrase but an historical necessity—and a condition for the emancipation of all workers.

Applying classical Marxism to Puerto Rico today, one must start with the assumption that American workers do not benefit from the oppression of Puerto Rican workers. Runaway industries that result in job losses, limited wages, lousy working conditions, environmental and health hazards do not benefit either working class. The role of revolutionary socialists is to build working-class solidarity across national borders. However, if international socialism is the final goal, the starting point is different depending on where revolutionaries find themselves. Socialists in the oppressor country must defend the right to self-

determination of the colonial countries, including the right to secession. Class unity across borders can only take place voluntarily. Real equality between the peoples of the oppressed nation and the oppressor nation can only be guaranteed by the freedom of the oppressed nation to secede if it so wishes. In turn, socialists in the oppressed country must argue for a firm and consistent opposition to imperialism and for international working-class unity, in particular unity with the workers of the oppressor country. After all, workers in both countries share a common enemy—the ruling class of the oppressor country. This includes sharply combating nationalist politics promoted by the middle class of the oppressed country. In Lenin’s words:

Whoever does not recognize and champion the equality of nations and languages, and does not fight against all national oppression or inequality, is not a Marxist...But it is also beyond doubt that the pseudo-Marxist who heaps abuse upon a Marxist of another nation for being an “assimilator” is simply a *nationalist philistine*.<sup>45</sup>

In the U.S. in 1997, this means that socialists support the right to self-determination of Puerto Ricans. It should be strictly up to Puerto Ricans to decide whether they want to become a state or an independent republic. Indeed, the fight against chauvinism and racism within the American working class extends to the defense of the right of Puerto Ricans to become a state if they choose to do so. Thus the emphasis at this moment has to be placed on the right to self-determination and on how the current political status of the island falls far short of this goal. The priority is to actively oppose and to expose the actions of American imperialism, and to unconditionally support the struggle of those who are fighting against it. Yet revolutionary socialists, wherever they are, have a duty to always critically evaluate the effectiveness of any political struggle.

In Puerto Rico, revolutionaries also need to gauge the current level of class consciousness and organization of the American working class. As it stands now, the American working class is very weak and its level of consciousness quite low. Thus any struggle today against imperialism and for workers power in Puerto Rico will, in all likelihood, raise the demand for separation from the U.S. In the current political period, it is impossible to conceive the Puerto Rican working class in power, but still under U.S. domination.

If one takes as a basis the economic, political, and military significance that Puerto Rico has for the U.S. ruling class, the revolutionary separation of Puerto Rico would represent a major blow against American imperialism. However, for Puerto Rican socialists, the issue of independence is a tactical question in the broader strategy of defeating international capitalism. One could conceive a scenario in which the radicalization of the Puerto Rican working class takes place when the American working class undergoes its own radicalization. Under those circumstances a proper revolutionary tactic would be for the Puerto Rican proletariat to join their American brothers and sisters in crushing their class enemy.

We need to remember how the Puerto Rican *hacendado* class leaned toward independence when it thought that an independent republic would allow it to more easily discipline its working class. Therefore, it is not difficult to imagine the most reactionary elements in the Puerto Rican ruling class suddenly turning into devoted patriots if they perceived that the American working class was ready to revolt. In fact, there is an historic precedent for such reactionary patriotism in an oppressed country. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, the bourgeoisies and upper middle classes of Poland, Finland and the Ukraine preferred to form their own national states rather than lose their privileges if their “own” working classes joined the Russian

# REPRESSION AND RESISTANCE

**A**t several points in Puerto Rico's history as a U.S. colony, independence supporters have taken up arms against the U.S. In 1950, Puerto Rican Nationalists staged an armed assault on Washington, D.C.'s Blair House, where President Harry Truman and his family stayed while construction crews worked on the White House. In 1954, four Nationalists opened fire during a session of the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington.

U.S. and colonial authorities crushed the Nationalist Party under tremendous repression. Authorities rounded up, imprisoned, and tortured Nationalist leaders. Albizu Campos, in particular, was the subject of intense repression. Eventually he spent twenty-three years in prison. Significant evidence corroborates his claims that he was subjected to radiation. The government denied this, using Albizu Campos' charges to allege that he was mentally ill. The use of radiation against a political prisoner would certainly put the American government in the same company as the German Nazis.

Since the 1960s, much of the Puerto Rican left has characterized the use of arms and bombs by small terrorist groups as the most radical expression of revolutionary politics. Groups like the FALN (National Liberation Armed Forces), and the *Macheteros* ("machete wielders") engaged in bank robberies, assassinations of military personnel, and bombings of military and economic targets.<sup>1</sup>

Today, fifteen Puerto Ricans belonging to both the *Macheteros* and the FALN languish in U.S. prisons, serving extremely lengthy sentences. Their sentences range from 35 to 105 years, while average sentences handed to nonpolitical prisoners accused of similar crimes range from 1.6 years to 8.6 years. The politically repressive nature of their punishment could not be clearer. These are the Puerto Rican political prisoners. A campaign demanding their liberation on humanitarian grounds has found extensive support among all political sectors on the island.

Socialists support freedom for these political prisoners, but we do not endorse their strategy or methods. Their politics necessarily underestimate the role of the masses in liberating themselves, placing a premium on the actions of the heroic few instead. In this respect, the politics of individual terrorism mirror the strategy of those *independentista* leaders and organizations that seek a solution to colonialism which can be imposed by the United Nations. Both neglect the self-activity of the working class.

Two strands of thought contribute to political thinking that

glorifies individual terrorism in Puerto Rico. First is the legacy of the Nationalist Party, whose armed struggle failed to gain broad popular support. The second strand stems from the Maoist politics of Asian, Latin American, and African guerrilla movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Then, the strategy of guerrilla warfare based on the peasantry seemed like a real alternative for many underdeveloped countries. But in Puerto Rico in the 1970s guerrillaism crashed against reality. The peasantry had disappeared some twenty years before.

During the heat of mass struggle in the early 1970s, the left conducted a serious debate about the nature of individual terrorism. When PSP leader Mari Bras endorsed a terrorist bombing, socialist César Andreu Iglesias criticized him, saying: "We

honestly believe that it is a stretch of the imagination to qualify as a 'guerrilla operation' what in our judgment is an act of individual terrorism...Just because bombs are used during war does not turn into an act of war the explosion of any bomb."<sup>2</sup>

Later, he added: "The course of history is paved with violence...Because violence, as Marx said, is the midwife of history. But do not mix it up: the midwife does not create life, it only helps its birth.

"Individual terrorism has never stimulated the masses to adopt revolutionary positions. Ordinarily the opposite takes place, and this is why we have to reject it. But understand that we are not tied to a shivering or pusillanimous pacifism. Sabotage and concerted actions, at specific moments and always sub-

ordinated to political objectives, are not alien to the mass struggle we propose. It is this mass struggle and no sporadic act of individual terrorism, which will check the government."<sup>3</sup>

Socialists believe that the violence of the oppressor is not equal to the violence of the oppressed struggling for justice. In Puerto Rico, the real terrorist is the American ruling class, which has plundered and savaged the island and the world. We unconditionally defend the right of Puerto Ricans to resist U.S. imperialism by any means necessary. But we strongly argue that not all means will take us to our end: the liberation of the working class, both in Puerto Rico and in the rest of the world. This is why the answer is not individual terrorism, but the building of a mass working-class movement.



1997 University student protest against state police on campus

<sup>1</sup> For an account of the actions of the *Macheteros* see R. Fernández, *Los Macheteros: The Wells Fargo robbery and the violent struggle for Puerto Rican Independence* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1987). See also *Socialist Worker*, May 23, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in G.H. Fromm, *César Andreu Iglesias: Aproximación a su vida y su obra* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1977), p. 63. My translation.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 62,64.

working class in spreading the socialist revolution.<sup>46</sup>

It is impossible to predict which way the political struggles will develop. History would suggest that there is a higher likelihood of a revolutionary situation developing on the island first. As Lenin used to say, the chain of imperialism breaks first at its weakest link. As we have seen, the political, social and economic contradictions in Puerto Rico are quite sharp. The situation has worsened at a steady pace in recent years. But for socialist revolution to take place in Puerto Rico, a mass revolutionary party composed of the most class-conscious elements of the working class is needed. Unfortunately, many leftists in Puerto Rico scoff at the idea of a revolution in the U.S. However, in the same way that they ignore the rich history of working class struggle in Puerto Rico, they also ignore the very radical labor struggles that have taken place in the U.S. In fact, revolutionaries in both Puerto Rico and the U.S. face the task of rebuilding the influence of socialists in the labor movement and building a new revolutionary left.

Rebuilding Puerto Rican workers' organizations will require a major effort. Since 1970, the percent of workers organized in unions has declined from 20 percent to around 6 percent.<sup>47</sup> The labor movement remains divided into three major confederations and into several strong independent public-sector unions. Given this difficult situation, it is the public sector unions which provide fertile ground for the recovery of the movement. More than 45 percent of transportation, communications and public utilities workers are unionized. The two general strikes against privatization of the state-owned phone company—in 1990 and in 1997—underscore the potential of Puerto Rican workers to fight back and to win many non-union workers to their side.

For too many years, the heroes of those who despise U.S. imperialism in Puerto Rico have been the patriots of the independence struggles of the 19th century. In those times, perhaps independence alone was enough. Today independence is not enough. We would do well by rediscovering our own working-class heroes, and more importantly, what they fought for. In spite of their shortcomings, they were absolutely correct in their prognosis: the liberation of humanity will only be accomplished through socialism. Ramón Romero Rosa, a printer, wrote in 1904:

And to the end that exploited humanity may one day triumph—as it surely will—and the social question be resolved, socialism, by the power of its ideals, calls on the proletariat to impregnate itself with this truth: that its interests as an exploited class are opposed to the exploiting class's interests, and so long as it lends direct or indirect support to that class it delays the coming of all humanity's socio-economic independence.

So it isn't enough to want to fight. We must know how to fight, for what human goal we fight, and against whom we fight.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Many of the statistics cited in this section are obtained from a compilation made by the Puerto Rican Economic Development Administration (PREDA), a government agency charged with promoting capital investment. Their figures come from agencies such as the Planning Board, the Department of Labor and Human Resources, and the Government Development Bank, among others. Their production of statistics is sluggish, and the accuracy of their figures inconsistent. Nonetheless, these figures still allow for generalizations.

<sup>2</sup> Rubén Berríos Martínez, "Puerto Rico's Decolonization," in *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1997, Vol. 76, No. 6, p. 111.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>4</sup> J.L. Dietz, *Economic history of Puerto Rico* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 249.

<sup>5</sup> *San Juan Star*, November 9, 1991; PREDA; Dietz, op cit., p. 275.

<sup>6</sup> Dietz, op cit., pp. 298-300; *Diálogo*, October, 1991.

<sup>7</sup> *San Juan Star*, November 6, 1991.

<sup>8</sup> *San Juan Star*, October 17, 1991.

<sup>9</sup> *San Juan Star*, November 26, 1991 and November 22, 1991.

<sup>10</sup> *San Juan Star*, December 1, 1991.

<sup>11</sup> R. B. Martínez, op cit., p. 104.

<sup>12</sup> J. Dietz and E. Pantojas-García, "Puerto Rico's new role in the Caribbean: the high finance/maquiladora strategy" in E. Meléndez and E. Meléndez, eds., *Colonial dilemma: critical perspectives on contemporary Puerto Rico* (Boston: South End Press, 1993), p. 104.

<sup>13</sup> PREDA.

<sup>14</sup> United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), *Economic survey of Puerto Rico* (1993), Part Two.

<sup>15</sup> See J. Rodríguez Beruff, *Política militar y dominación* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> See C. Pabón, 'De Albizu a Madonna: Para armar y desarmar la nacionalidad,' *Bordes* (1995), no 1, p. 35.

<sup>17</sup> See reports in *Socialist Worker*, October 10 and 24, 1997.

<sup>18</sup> "Clinton: bipartisan president," *International Socialist Review 1* (Summer 1997).

<sup>19</sup> ECLAC, op cit.

<sup>20</sup> Interview published in *Granma Internacional*, February 5, 1996. The translation is mine.

<sup>21</sup> Much of my discussion regarding the first thirty years of American domination is based on the seminal historiographical work by A.G. Quintero Rivera who has explicitly modeled his analysis of the development of the Puerto Rican working class on the work of British historian E.P. Thompson, in particular Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (Penguin, London, 1968). See A.G. Quintero Rivera, *Patricios y plebeyos: burgueses, hacendados, artesanos y obreros* (Ediciones Huracán, 1988), p. 286. Other important works are A.G. Quintero Rivera, *Conflictos de clase y política en Puerto Rico* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1986); A. Quintero Rivera, *Workers Struggles in Puerto Rico: A Documentary History* (Monthly Review Press, 1976); G.L. García and A.G. Quintero Rivera, *Desafío y solidaridad: breve historia del movimiento obrero puertorriqueño* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1986).

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Quintero Rivera, *Patricios y plebeyos...*, op cit., p. 113. My translation.

<sup>23</sup> See W. Mattos Cintrón, *La política y lo político en Puerto Rico* (Ediciones Era, 1980), pp. 62-65. Regarding the politics of the AFL, see P.S. Foner's series *History of the Labor Movement in the United States* (New York: International Publishers). The AFL's policies in Puerto Rico extended the narrow craft unionism it practiced in the U.S. where it refused to accept into its ranks Blacks, women, or immigrants.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132, and García and Quintero Rivera, op cit., pp. 101-110.

<sup>25</sup> Taller de Formación Política (TFP), *La Cuestión Nacional: El Partido Nacionalista y el movimiento obrero puertorriqueño* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1982).

<sup>26</sup> García and Quintero Rivera, op cit., pp. 122-125.

<sup>27</sup> See an extensive account of the strike, the new working class militancy, and consciousness, and the role of the CIO in TFP, *No estamos pidiendo el cielo: huelga portuaria de 1938* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1988).

<sup>28</sup> See the discussion by Mattos Cintrón, op cit., p. 119.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in M. Maldonado-Denis, *Puerto Rico y Estados Unidos: emigración y colonialismo* (San Juan: Ediciones Compromiso, 1984), pp. 110-113.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in M. Ostolaza Bey, *Política sexual en Puerto Rico* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1989), p. 82.

<sup>31</sup> M. Galvin, *The Organized Labor Movement in Puerto Rico* (New York: Associated University Press, 1979), p.101.

<sup>32</sup> García and Quintero Rivera, op cit., p. 123.

<sup>33</sup> See Mattos Cintrón, op cit., p.122 (in particular notes 156 and 157).

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in G. H. Fromm, *César Andreu Iglesias: Aproximación a su vida y su obra* (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1977), p. 46 (My translation).

<sup>35</sup> M. Maldonado-Denis, *Hacia una interpretación marxista de la historia de Puerto Rico y otros ensayos* (San Juan: Editorial Antillana, 1977), p. 147.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted by R Berríos Martínez, "Independence for Puerto Rico: The Only Solution," *Foreign Affairs* (1977), vol. 55, no 3, p. 567.

<sup>37</sup> Maldonado-Denis, *Hacia...* op. cit., pp. 147-149.

<sup>38</sup> Mattos Cintrón, op. cit., pp. 144, 162-163.

<sup>39</sup> *El Nuevo Día*, December 6, 1991. Unfortunately, space limitations do not allow for a detailed description of the extent of political persecution of the independentista movement. For example, with approval of the FBI, the local police kept records for decades of anyone connected to the independence, student, and labor movements, the now infamous *carpetas* (dossiers). In the late 1980s, the government lost a lawsuit which forced it to hand over these *carpetas*—tens of thousands—to its victims. The most prominent leaders of the movements were handed over literally boxes of their records. My own records list as criminally suspicious activities, among others, attending a documentary about the civil war in El Salvador, and being one of several students who were independence supporters who just happened to be graduating in June, 1983.

<sup>40</sup> Maldonado-Denis, *Hacia...*, op cit., p. 149.

<sup>41</sup> Mattos Cintrón, op cit., p. 139.

<sup>42</sup> Maldonado-Denis, *Hacia...*, op cit., p. 161.

<sup>43</sup> See Fromm, op cit., p. 114.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>45</sup> V. Lenin, *Questions of National Policy and Proletarian Internationalism* (New York: Progress Publishers, 1975) p. 21.

<sup>46</sup> See V. Serge, *Year One of the Russian Revolution* (London: Bookmarks and Pluto Press, 1992).

<sup>47</sup> C.A. Santiago-Rivera, "The Puerto Rican Labor Movement in the 1990s," in *Colonial Dilemma: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Puerto Rico*, E. Meléndez and E. Meléndez, eds. (Boston: South End Press, 1993), pp. 143-155.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Quintero Rivera, *Workers' Struggles in Puerto Rico: A Documentary History*, op cit., p.27.