

Puerto Rican strikes hit phone privatization

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The strikes by 6,400 telephone workers against the sale of the Puerto Rico Telephone Company have garnered widespread support throughout the Caribbean island against the free-market policies of Governor Pedro J. Rosselló. Last Wednesday Rosselló, who is also a proponent of making the US territory one of the United States, signed legislation for the \$1.875 billion sale of the government owned phone company to a consortium led by the US-owned GTE Corporation and the Banco Popular de Puerto Rico.

Two unions struck PRTC on June 18--the Independent Union of Telephone Workers (UIE), and Independent Brotherhood of Telephone Workers (HIETEL). The striking telephone workers were joined Tuesday by more than 1,000 members of the Teamsters union and the Ports Employees Union. The following day 6,000 members of the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority and Irrigation Workers union began a three-day strike to protest the phone company sale. The port workers blocked one entrance to the busy port in San Juan for several hours. The Aqueduct Workers Union walked out for 24 hours.

On Sunday, 1,200 delegates from trade unions and other organizations voted to approve a national strike of all workers in Puerto Rico against the privatization. The assembly of the Comité Amplio de Organizaciones (CAOS-Broad Committee of Trade Union Organizations), which represents 60 unions and nearly 50,000 workers, including the main public sector unions, voted for a 48-hour strike to take place sometime after Wednesday.

Thousands of workers participated in mass marches and rallies last week, carrying signs accusing Rosselló of being a fascist, spelling his name with two swastikas. The strikes have cut off phone service for 345,000 of the company's clients, roughly 20 percent. One-third of the island's 888 automated teller machines were out of service.

The governor has said he will not back down from the sale of the company, which will immediately result in the elimination of 2,700 of the 7,900 workers' jobs. Rosselló has made the phone company's sale the centerpiece of his plans to privatize everything from utilities to health care to the once-mighty sugar industry. The governor--who has sold hotels, a shipping company and privatized the management of the water company--is selling off hospitals, proposing a school voucher program and slashing funding to the University of Puerto Rico.

Shortly after the strike began on June 18 hundreds of heavily-armed Puerto Rico police were deployed to break the picket lines of striking telephone workers. Management was flown in by helicopter, but the picketing stopped the delivery of food to the strikebreakers. As students joined the pickets, the police carried out violent attacks injuring scores of strikers and their supporters. Broadcasts of police beating strikers provoked an outpouring of support. Unions collected over \$100,000 in donations for the strike fund from the public, which opposes the privatization of the phone company by a two-to-one margin, according to local polls.

The local press, the police and the governor have denounced the protests, which have included the damage of phone lines and ATM machines. The chief of police, Pedro Toledo, accused students, pro-independence faculty of the University of Puerto Rico, and other 'outside agitators' for the violence on the picket lines.

Last October, over 100,000 demonstrators converged on San Juan to protest government plans to privatize PRTC. That demonstration was the largest protest of any kind ever to take place in Puerto Rico.



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