

Two-day general strike paralyzes Puerto Rico

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A general strike Tuesday and Wednesday by Puerto Rico unions protesting the privatization of the state-run telephone company shut down most of the Caribbean island, a US Commonwealth, closing banks, hospitals, shopping malls and halting transport. Many government offices were also closed as civil servants rallied behind the strike.

An estimated 700,000 workers, a significant portion of the island's 3.8 million residents, participated in the walkout, the largest work stoppage in Puerto Rico's history. The strike was called by a coalition of 60 unions led by the telephone workers.

Strike supporters briefly blocked access to the main airport in San Juan. There were also sporadic shutdowns of water and electric service.

On the second day of the strike workers blocked the gates to the Carolina plant of Eli Lilly and Co., an Indianapolis-based pharmaceutical company. Strikers also blocked the entrance to San Juan's second largest airport of Isla Grande.

Workers at the state-owned Puerto Rico Telephone Company have been on strike since June 18 over the government's privatization plans. Puerto Rico Governor Pedro Rossello wants to sell the telephone company to a group of investors led by GTE and the Banco Popular de Puerto Rico. In recent weeks police beatings of strikers have generated an outpouring of popular support for the telephone workers. Opinion polls showed island residents opposing privatization by a margin of two to one.

Rossello has shown no signs of backing off from his privatization plans. He has again rejected union leaders' demands that he hold a referendum on the sale of the phone company. Instead he is insisting on holding a referendum on whether Puerto Rico should become the fifty-first US state. Statehood supporters have charged that the strike is aimed at frightening foreign investors and undermining attempts to be admitted to the US.

Despite the success of the general strike, union leaders are set to meet July 9 to discuss ending the telephone workers' walkout. Annie Cruz, head of the telephone workers union, said they may propose other tactics, such as one-day protest strikes.



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