

500,000 workers join in Puerto Rican general strike

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A general strike called by Puerto Rico's public employee unions over the proposed sale of the state-owned telephone company paralyzed the entire island for 48 hours. Some 60 unions representing 200,000 workers in the public sector called the strike, but the union federation, CAOS, the Spanish acronym for Broad Committee of Union Organizations, estimated that half a million Puerto Rican workers took part in the action.

The strike, which began June 7, halted all public transportation, shut down the docks and led to the sporadic cutting of telephone, water and electrical service in cities across the island.

The nation's largest bank, Banco Popular, which is a partner in the deal struck with the telecommunications giant GTE to buy the Puerto Rico Telephone Company, closed all of its branches. Bank management said it took this action because of fear of violence. The major shopping malls in the capital of San Juan were also shut down, and the streets of Old San Juan, the city's main tourist attraction, were deserted.

On Tuesday, the first day of the general strike, demonstrators blockaded Avenida Baldorioty de Castro, the main artery linking San Juan to the international airport. Tens of thousands of strikers also gathered outside the telephone company's headquarters in a show of support for the 6,400 phone workers who are entering the fourth week of their strike against privatization. Another focal point of the strike was the Department of Education, where striking teachers mounted mass pickets to prevent administrative personnel from entering.

Gov. Pedro Rossello, the leader of the pro-statehood party, PNP or Partido Nuevo Progresista, responded to the walkout with the deployment of militarized police units against the workers and increasingly bellicose

denunciations of the unions. On the eve of the general strike Rossello referred to the planned action as an 'attempted coup.'

The strike, the largest in the island's history, was triggered by the decision to sell off the telephone company to the US telecommunications giant, a move that the phone workers unions claim will result in thousands of layoffs. Electrical and water workers, teachers and other public employees rallied to the support of the phone workers because Puerto Rico's entire public sector is faced with the threat of privatization and the elimination of jobs. On an island where the official unemployment rate still stands at over 12 percent, and the real jobless figure probably stands at closer to 30 percent, the public sector has represented one of the few areas of stable employment.

Telephone union leaders declared the general strike a success and raised the possibility of calling an indefinite general strike. At the same time, however, they have begun raising the likelihood of entering into an agreement with the Puerto Rican government and GTE that would, they claim, guarantee job security.

One proposal calls for an end to the walkout in return for Governor Rossello's agreement to hold a referendum on the sale of the company. A union leader floated the possibility of the unions participating in some form of 'workers' buyout' of the company, based on employee stock ownership and loans from the banks. Other proposals have been aired for following the general strike with a series of protests, such as one-hour strikes by different segments of the work force.

The AFL-CIO is leading the effort to prevent the struggle from spiraling out of control. The labor federation's president, John Sweeney addressed a letter to Governor Rossello during the first weeks of the telephone workers' strike and Jimmy Torres, the AFL-

CIO's regional director on the island, entered into talks with the government on the eve of the general strike.

Rossello is a delegate to the Democratic Party, though his PNP also includes Republicans. He has sought bipartisan support for holding a referendum on Puerto Rico's political status in 1998. Over the past two decades, statehood forces have gained steadily against the pro-Commonwealth faction, led by the PPD (Partido Popular Democratico), and the dwindling ranks of the Puerto Rican independence movement.

The political factions on the island have taken opposing sides on the strike. The PNP and Rossello have denounced the telephone workers' action as a purely political maneuver aimed at defeating statehood and convincing the US Congress that the island is too unstable to consider convening a referendum. PNP leaders have denounced the strikers as 'terrorists' and 'saboteurs.'

The PPD has condemned Rossello for intransigence and called for a referendum on the sale of the phone company. PPD leader Anibal Acevedo Vila called the strike 'a crisis without parallel in the history of our country,' and appealed for 'dialog' and an end to confrontation.

Pro-independence forces have sought to identify themselves with the walkout, denouncing Rossello for 'selling out' the Puerto Rican nation to foreign investors. No doubt the slogans of the nationalists have found a certain resonance among the strikers, who are hostile to the sell-off of state enterprises and the elimination of their jobs.

Yet none of the political factions--from Rossello's PNP to the clandestine armed nationalists of the Macheteros--can provide any coherent answer to the demands of the workers. The pro-statehood government is proceeding with privatizations in order to bring Puerto Rico's economy into line with that of the mainland US and to increase its attractiveness to multinational capital.

Yet both the PPD and the *independentistas* have condemned the proposal for statehood on the grounds that becoming the fifty-first state would weaken Puerto Rico's economy by making it less competitive in the global competition for foreign investment. Essentially, the policy pursued by Rossello follows the same line taken by nominally independent governments throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. The sale

of national telephone companies throughout the region has served as one of the pillars of Wall Street's profitable investments in so-called emerging markets.

The eruption of class struggle in Puerto Rico is a manifestation of a historic crisis of the island's economic development and its political subordination to US colonialism. In the beginning of the postwar period, the US sought to industrialize the island, inaugurating the so-called Operation Bootstrap as a means of exploiting relatively cheap Puerto Rican labor. This strategy was followed by the imposition of the Section 936 tax codes, an attempt to encourage investment by allowing corporations what amounted to a tax holiday on the island.

While US-based capital has profited from each of these initiatives, none of them have brought about a significant change in Puerto Rico's structural unemployment, nor have they changed conditions that have left more than 60 percent of the population below the official poverty line. The inauguration of the NAFTA agreement between the US and Mexico has served to further undermine Puerto Rico's appeal to foreign capital seeking cheap labor or a convenient export platform into the US market.

If the combativity of the Puerto Rican workers demonstrated in the general strike is to find a way forward, it will be not on the road of nationalism, but rather by uniting with the working class of the US and throughout the Americas in a common struggle against the transnational corporations and banks and the governments that serve their interests.



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