

Puerto Rico's Referendum

A vote of social protest

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The recent vote by Puerto Ricans to reject statehood for the third time in 30 years had within it a powerful element of social protest by the population of the US colonial possession.

The New Progressive Party (PNP), the pro-statehood party of Governor Pedro Rossello, backed by business interests on the island and elements of both the Republican and Democratic parties within the US, waged a lavishly financed campaign to win a majority for turning the Caribbean island into the fifty-first US state.

The results proved disappointing for the PNP and its backers, however. In the December 13 referendum, only 46.4 percent of the Puerto Rican electorate voted for statehood, while 50.2 percent chose a ballot option reading 'none of the above.'

The island's main opposition party, the Popular Democratic Party, urged voters to choose 'none of the above' because it disagreed with the way in which the Rossello government had worded an option that essentially called for continuing Puerto Rico's 'free associated state' or 'commonwealth' status. The party had also protested the timing of the referendum, charging that holding the vote just months after the massive damage done to portions of the island by Hurricane Georges constituted a frivolous waste of resources.

For masses of Puerto Rican voters--over 70 percent of eligible voters went to the polls, a far higher ratio than has been registered in any US election in recent years--voting 'none of the above' undoubtedly constituted both a rejection of the statehood option as well as hostility to the status quo. What predominated in the referendum was the distrust of the majority for the policies advanced by both major parties.

It was widely acknowledged by Puerto Rican political analysts that underlying the vote totals was a growing social polarization on the island. Within the well-off sections of Puerto Rico's middle class, the statehood option won strong support. Opposition, however, centered

among the working class and the poor population, which voted overwhelmingly in opposition.

With nearly two-thirds of Puerto Rico's population living below the poverty line, the underlying social discontent of the masses was of a far greater weight than could be shifted by the slick advertising campaign of Rossello's PNP.

The proponents of statehood picked up little more support than in the last referendum held in 1993, when they gained 46.3 percent of the vote. In 1967 they won 38.98 percent.

The third historic alternative for Puerto Rico, independence, gained only 2.5 percent of this latest vote.

While the majority remains hostile to the statehood option and masses are dissatisfied with the status quo, a relative handful see the creation of a sovereign nation state as a credible solution to the social problems confronting the Puerto Rican people.

Independence no doubt presents particular problems for the people of Puerto Rico. With a population of barely 3.9 million, more than 2 million have gone to live in the US and, in many cases, people travel back and forth between the mainland.

Moreover, the fate of Puerto Rico's neighbors, the formally independent nations of the Caribbean, hardly provides a compelling argument for nationhood. None of these countries have succeeded in forging a truly independent path of national development. From the Dominican Republic and Haiti to Cuba, none of them have been able to free themselves from the crushing domination of imperialism.

Taking place on the hundredth anniversary of the US conquest of Puerto Rico, which it seized from Spain as part of the settlement of the Spanish-American War, the referendum has solved none of the historic problems of the island's status.

Under the current arrangement, Puerto Ricans are American citizens with the right to move to the mainland.

Residents of the island, however, cannot vote for president and send only one nonvoting delegate to Congress. They receive reduced welfare and other federal benefits. The population of the island is considerably poorer than that of the poorest US state, Mississippi.

Puerto Rico is a major base of operations for the US military, which controls tens of thousands of acres on the island. Washington recently moved the headquarters of the US Army's Southern Command, which directs US military activity throughout Latin America, from the Panama Canal Zone to Puerto Rico.

Curiously, Rossello, whose closest allies have included Newt Gingrich and other stalwarts of the Republican Party, has argued for statehood by branding the present relationship between the US and Puerto Rico as 'colonialist.' Since the referendum, Rossello has attempted to portray the vote as an endorsement of statehood.

'Of those voters expressing a status preference, over 90 percent chose statehood, continuing a trend that reveals this option to be the only one that continues to command strong popular support,' the governor's office said in a statement. 'Now that voters have rejected that [commonwealth] status overwhelmingly, and demonstrated continuing and stable support for statehood, the debate must shift to the terms and conditions of statehood.'

The governor has indicated that he is going to Washington to present this interpretation of the referendum to Clinton and the Congress in an attempt to secure legislation opening the way to statehood

It is considered extremely unlikely that Washington will share Rossello's analysis. There is strong ambivalence within US ruling circles over the statehood project in any case. Within the right-wing leadership of Congress, those backing 'English-only' and anti-immigrant measures can hardly be expected to welcome the admission of a predominantly Spanish-speaking state to the Union. Moreover, in the most recent historical precedents, Alaska and Hawaii became the last states to join the Union only after their populations came out respectively with 83 percent and 94 percent votes in favor of statehood.

'I recognize that a significant number of people voted [for none of the above] as a protest against me personally, or against my administration ... or against the telephone company,' Rossello told a rally of supporters after the polls closed. Indeed, social discontent has grown under the Rossello government, erupting into a general strike in July over its decision to sell the state-run telephone company, threatening thousands of jobs.

His previous drive to privatize Puerto Rico's hospitals also provoked protests and resulted in the shutdown of healthcare facilities and decreased service. Cuts in university funding and tuition hikes have also sparked student unrest directed against the island's government.

Underlying the status debate is the shifting geopolitical position of Puerto Rico under the impact of the increasing global mobility of finance capital. The lifeblood of the island's economy has for years been the operation of US-based multinationals that have set up manufacturing plants operating under Section 936 of the Internal Revenue Code, allowing corporations to operate in Puerto Rico and repatriate their profits tax-free to their US parent companies.

Not only have the 936 tax breaks been reduced, the advent of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the lowering of tariff barriers and taxation on foreign capital throughout the region have created powerful competitors, offering even cheaper labor than what is available in Puerto Rico.

Influential sections of big business on the island increasingly see Puerto Rico's future as that of a financial and commercial center for US interests throughout Latin America, with a significantly reduced role for manufacturing and the modern industrial working class that came into being on the island in the 1960s.

The thrust of the Rossello government's policies has been to diminish the strength of the Puerto Rican working class, through the dismantling of the island's large state sector and the gutting of labor laws and social benefits.

In the final analysis, the fundamental question of Puerto Rico's status will be decided not in a three-way contest between the supporters of statehood, commonwealth and independence, but rather in a struggle to determine which class will rule the island and whether its economy will be developed to serve the interests of a thin layer of privileged businessmen and the comfortable middle class, or those of the masses of workers and poor. Moreover, Puerto Rico's legacy of colonial oppression can only be overcome on the basis of an international strategy which unites working people on the island and throughout Latin America with their class brothers and sisters in the United States.



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