

Puerto Rico: Teachers battle unionbusting

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Thousands of public school teachers in Puerto Rico are in the second week of a bitter island-wide strike which has turned into a full-fledged battle against unionbusting. They are fighting the government of Governor Anibal Acevedo Vila, who has the apparent support of the bureaucracy of the US-based Service Employees International Union and its vice president Dennis Rivera.

The 42,000 teachers are represented by the Puerto Rico Federation of Teachers, an independent union. Before the strike began on February 21, they had been working for 30 months without a contract. Among the major demands of the teachers is a sizable pay increase (they presently earn a starting salary of only \$19,200 a year), a cap on class size, and the establishment of local teachers' committees which would have control of class schedules.

There have been numerous confrontations on the picket lines, with 14 teachers reported arrested on the first day of the strike. Riot police of the Tactical Operations Unit have been mobilized at some schools and have attacked the pickets.

There are conflicting reports on the effectiveness of the strike. Puerto Rico Department of Education officials claimed it was not effective, but only 16 percent of students were reported in class in the capital of San Juan. The action is reportedly not as effective in more rural areas. Union officials said that 80 percent of classes were not being held, and that 54 percent of teachers were supporting the strike, with 8,000 on the picket lines.

On February 27, thousands of teachers and supporters demonstrated in San Juan's Hato Rey business district. The teachers have also attracted support from students at the University of Puerto Rico. In New York, some 80 teachers and other supporters demonstrated at the local office of the Puerto Rican government.

Puerto Rico is entering the third year of recession,

with an actual contraction of the economy that is expected to reach a cumulative total of 5 percent this year. Most of the public school students come from households living in poverty, and the high school graduation rate is only 60 percent. Conditions in the schools, which are funded by the US Department of Education, are inadequate. As one striker, Ana Aviles, told the press: "Our working conditions are substandard - no books, no supplies and no toilet paper in the bathrooms, inoperative water fountains - and we're still expected to teach. At what point do you say enough?"

The teachers are now fighting a well-organized unionbusting campaign. According to *New York Daily News* columnist Juan Gonzalez, after the teachers voted last November to authorize a strike, Governor Acevedo Vila imposed new working conditions, decertified the union and suspended its dues check-off.

Gonzalez reports that, behind the scenes, Dennis Rivera, an SEIU vice president and longtime president of Hospital Workers Local 1199 based in New York, was maneuvering to raid the Puerto Rican teachers union. Rivera has helped to found a new group, the Union of Puerto Rican Teachers, a subsidiary of the Puerto Rico Teachers Association, which has represented principals and supervisors in Puerto Rico's public schools. Rivera held a press conference in January of this year to announce that the principals and their newly formed subsidiary were affiliating with the SEIU and were demanding an election to remove the Puerto Rico Federation of Teachers.

Gonzalez cites a report in New York's Spanish language daily *El Diario-La Prensa* that Rivera met with Governor Acevedo Vila, a longtime friend, and that Rivera had discussed possible financial backing from the union for the Governor.

Rivera called this claim "a total fabrication." "Did I meet with the governor of Puerto Rico in a public restaurant around August? Yes, I've met with him

maybe 20 times. Did I offer him donations in any way, shape or form? Absolutely not.”

Whether there was any direct financial quid pro quo is not really decisive in this case. Rivera’s unionbusting, while outrageous, is no surprise. He has literally, decades of experience in combining “left” talk with the most fully developed corporatist relationships with the employers and the government.

At various times Rivera has been vice chairman of the New York State Democratic Party, as well as a main financial and political backer of key figures in the New York State Republican Party machine, all the while claiming to represent the interests of New York’s hospital workers. He has a well-deserved reputation as one of the most devious operators within the big business political set-up.

Rivera’s latest moves shed light on the nature of the Change to Win labor federation formed when the AFL-CIO split two and a half years ago. The new grouping, taking approximately 35 percent of the dwindling membership of the AFL-CIO, claimed to stand for organizing the unorganized and a more militant stance in general. In fact, it has maintained the labor bureaucracy’s support for the capitalist system and its two political parties. Its main difference with the AFL-CIO has been its receptiveness toward collaborating with Republicans as well as Democrats. In the case of the Puerto Rican teachers, this coalition has now aligned itself with the island colony’s governor and his riot police in a bid to grab a new dues revenue stream by brutally suppressing a strike.



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