

Puerto Rico: General strike against mass layoffs

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Hundreds of thousands of workers joined a day-long general strike Thursday in opposition to the layoffs of tens of thousands of public employees ordered by the island territory's Governor Luis Fortuño.

The biggest action took place in the Hato Rey financial district of San Juan, the Puerto Rican capital, where over 100,000 workers and students rallied outside the Plaza Las Americas, the biggest shopping mall on the island, which was forced to shut down for the day.

Shops and businesses in Hato Rey and nearby Old San Juan were also shuttered in advance of the demonstration.

The strike shut public and private universities. The Puerto Rican department of education reported barely 2 percent attendance in public schools. And most state-owned enterprises and public offices were also shut down by the walkout.

The strike was provoked by Fortuño's decree last month ordering the dismissal of 17,000 public workers. The layoffs, which are set to take effect in the beginning of November, were ordered under legislation passed earlier this year known as Law 7, or the "Special Law Declaring a State of Fiscal Emergency," which suspended public employees' collective bargaining rights and mandated \$2 billion in cuts, slashing the budget by 20 percent across the board.

The round of layoffs announced in September comes on top of 5,000 already carried out by the government. It is anticipated that as many as 30,000 public workers will lose their jobs as the Fortuño government has unveiled plans to eliminate as many as 40 public agencies through mergers, privatizations and outright shutdowns.

The public sector accounts for 25 percent of all jobs in Puerto Rico, where the official unemployment rate

stands at over 15 percent. The mass layoffs are expected to exacerbate a recession that is now in its fourth year and to drive the jobless rate over the 17 percent mark.

Fortuño, the leader of the pro-statehood New Progressive Party (known by its Spanish acronym PNP), was the first PNP candidate for governor in 40 years to run openly as a member of the US Republican Party. His PNP predecessors in the office had been affiliated with the Democrats. He promised to attract jobs to the island with low taxes and pro-business policies, but has presided over a steady deepening of Puerto Rico's economic crisis.

The past 12 months have seen another 89,000 jobs wiped out in the private sector. The island's labor participation rate has fallen to just 36.5 percent. The number of Puerto Ricans moving to the United States to flee the island's economic crisis is reportedly rising, with as many as 70,000 estimated to be leaving this year.

Now Fortuño's main agenda is to slash Puerto Rico's \$3.2 billion fiscal deficit and prevent the Wall Street rating agencies from downgrading government bonds to "junk" status.

Thursday's mass turnout came in the face of increasing threats and intimidation from the Fortuño government. The Monday before the strike, the 11 campuses of the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) were suddenly shut down for the week and occupied by state police. It was reported that the action was taken on the advice of the local office of the FBI on the pretext of assuring the "security" of the students. The shutdown came just as students at a number of the campuses were to hold general assemblies for the purpose of taking votes on joining the strike.

And, in the week leading up to the strike, officials in

Puerto Rico's colonial government threatened that workers who participated in the general strike could be charged with acts of terrorism if they interfered with the movement of goods and passengers at the island's airports and docks.

Justice Secretary Antonio Sagardía and Police Superintendent José Figueroa Sancha issued the public warning, claiming that terrorism charges would be justified on the grounds of interfering with interstate commerce. Fortuño also equated workers' actions with "terrorism."

The executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Puerto Rico, William Ramírez, denounced the government threats. "Calling individuals who are exercising their right to protest terrorists is dangerous in a democracy, and I am very worried about the turn of events. These are public servants," he said. The administration, he charged, was "sowing fear because no one wants to be labeled a terrorist."

On the day of the strike itself, the government deployed some 15,000 police in San Juan. A police helicopter circled the rally and police agents photographed and filmed demonstrators.

Nonetheless, large numbers of public employees, other workers, students and members of civic associations turned out, carrying homemade signs parodying Fortuño and denouncing the layoffs.

Members of the Nurses and Health Workers Union marched with an open coffin carrying a mannequin bearing the face of Fortuño, which they placed on the speakers' platform.

The most serious confrontation of the day took place on the Luis A. Ferré highway, the island's largest roadway, where students staged an occupation and standoff with riot-equipped police and mounted units. According to the daily *Nuevo Día*, some of the protesters carried sticks, pipes and chains and burned tires on the roadway.

As riot police prepared to attack, the students were convinced to leave by Rafael Cancel Miranda, who had come to the highway. Cancel Miranda is a well known figure in Puerto Rico, having spent 25 years in prison for joining with three others supporters of Puerto Rican independence in shooting into the US House of Representatives from a visitors' gallery in 1954.

Clashes between demonstrators and police were also

reported in the eastern port city of Fajardo.

Puerto Rican union leaders threatened to call an indefinite general strike if the Fortuño government failed to rescind the mass layoffs.

For his part, Fortuño vowed that he would not "turn back" and claimed that without the layoffs and other drastic budget cuts, the entire government would be compelled to shut down.

Meanwhile, *Nuevo Día* reported that Friday that Fortuño had agreed to meet that afternoon with the leaders of US unions with which the local unions involved in the strikes and protests are affiliated. The bureaucrats included Gerald McEntee, the president of the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), as well as officials of the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

Fortuño claimed that the meeting was to discuss proposals for realizing another \$800 million in budget cuts.

According to *Nuevo Día*, "the meeting was coordinated without the knowledge of the local unions affiliated to these US organizations."

Later in the day, it was announced that the meeting had been cancelled.

There is no doubt that events in Puerto Rico are being watched closely by both the Obama administration in Washington (together with its FBI agents in San Juan) and the leaders of the right-wing US trade union apparatus. Under conditions of mounting unemployment and falling wages, their joint concern is to quell the growing class confrontation on the island for fear that it will soon spread to the United States itself.



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