

Workers rally in support of Puerto Rican students

Rafael Azul**21 May 2010**

A general strike called by trade unions and civic organizations in support of striking university students took place in Puerto Rico on Tuesday May 18. This is the second one-day general strike in the space of one year.

The strike began on Tuesday morning, as members of the Teamsters union (truck drivers) picketed the San Juan docks, persuading stevedores not to cross their picket lines. The Office Clerks Union set up picket lines at government offices across the island.

Public school teachers rallied at their schools and then marched to University of Puerto Rico campuses. By the afternoon, thousands of workers, students and other supporters of the striking students rallied across the island.

Outside of the public sector, this general strike did not generate the level of support shown last October. A spokesperson for Governor Luis Fortuño called it a “failure”; however, popular support for the students is undeniable.

Seven months ago, on October 15, Puerto Rican trade unionists went on a 24-hour general strike to protest the austerity measures being imposed on Puerto Rican society by Governor Fortuño, to protest the sacking of some 24,000 public employees.

That strike, organized by a coalition of trade unions and civic organizations, including *Todo Puerto Rico por Puerto Rico* (Puerto Ricans all for Puerto Rico—TPRPR) led by a Bishop Leva, a Methodist with close ties to the Service Employees International Union, ended in a rally of 100,000 workers in San Juan’s financial district. This massive demonstration of workers’ fighting spirit was followed up by other protests in October and November.

The unions, however, went back on their threat to make the strike permanent. Undeterred by the protests,

the Governor went ahead with his austerity measures. In a budget speech on April 26, Fortuño boasted that the government spent even less in 2010 than he had anticipated. This week 400 layoff slips were distributed, bringing the total number of workers sacked since last November to 19,000. Many of the remaining workers have been placed on short hours.

In addition to the layoffs, which will affect 14 percent of the public work force, the austerity budget freezes wages and benefits for the next two years.

The attack on public higher education is in line with Fortuño’s entire austerity plan, which seeks to slash \$3.5 billion from this island colony’s budget over three years. For the University of Puerto Rico, this means decreasing yearly budgets (the governor, in a disingenuous manner, claims that UPR is not losing anything, since it will continue to receive 9.6 percent of tax receipts, which, as a result of the impact of the global recession, have been plummeting.) Across the board, the University System budget will be reduced by more than 20 percent by 2012.

Holders of Puerto Rican bonds so far have supported the Governor’s measures. The purchase of Puerto Rican debt is on the rise—Wall Street’s recognition that the Fortuño administration puts financial and banking interests ahead of those of Puerto Rican students and workers.

The student strikers are demanding the restoration of University funds by taxing the wealthy and multinational corporations that operate in Puerto Rico. They have linked their struggle to that of the Puerto Rican working class, appealed for and received the support of tens of thousands of ordinary Puerto Ricans.

This support has become increasingly evident since May 14, as hundreds rallied at the university, bringing the students food, water and other essentials—as

documented by video journalist Noelia González.

Ten of the eleven campuses of the university are on strike in defense of the right to education for all Puerto Rican youth. Concretely, they are demanding the restoration of US\$100 million in budget cuts, the retention of tuition waivers, no increase in tuition and fees, and greater student participation in the running of the university.

The decision by the university trustees to deny food and water to student strikers occupying the Rio Piedras campus in San Juan sparked widespread popular anger.

On Monday, the courts lifted the order banning food and water. Claiming that this is an internal issue between the university and its students, Governor Fortuño so far has stonewalled student requests that he and the university trustees participate in negotiations over the financing of the university.

Toward midday Tuesday, supporters of the student strike began to converge on UPR campuses across the island. In Río Piedras, Avenida Ponce de León, one of San Juan's main boulevards, was jammed with demonstrators moving toward the occupied university.

The rally included contingents of teachers, construction workers, and electricians. Also present were members of the Mothers Against the Iraq War and university professors.

As thousands of students, workers and their supporters marched on the university; the crowd took on a festive character, with music and street theater. Many marchers were holding homemade signs in support of the students and denouncing Fortuño and the university trustees.

Arturo Ríos, a member of the Student Negotiating Committee thanked the working class for its show of solidarity. "Our presence here is no tantrum; it is driven by our understanding that our struggle is just and nobody will stop us."

Ríos' sentiment is echoed by many other students, who, by their signs and by their statements see their struggle as part of a broader class struggle by the working class in defense of living standards and democratic rights.

For the union bureaucracy, which in Puerto Rico is for the most part controlled by the AFL-CIO apparatus in the US, the May 18 strike, like the October 15 action before it, was merely of a symbolic character.

Their perspective is one of pressuring Fortuño to alter

his austerity measures, while accepting the necessity for concessions to "balance the budget." Above all they are determined to maintain the struggles of students and the working class subordinated to the capitalist colonial setup in Puerto Rico and the domination of two bourgeois parties—Fortuño's pro-statehood New Progressive Party—aligned with the Republicans in the US—and the opposition pro-commonwealth Popular Democratic Party, tied to the US Democrats.

Puerto Rico is a colonial territory of the United States and an integral part of the US economy. Fortuño is carrying out the policies of Wall Street investment banks and hedge funds, as much as New York's Governor David Paterson, California's Arnold Schwarzenegger and the governors of all the other US states.

The students' struggle in Puerto Rico can be carried forward only through a turn to the working class as a whole and the fight for a socialist alternative to capitalism, an economic system that is incompatible with the egalitarian principle that everyone has a right to quality education.

The Socialist Equality Party and its student wing, the International Students for Social Equality, are part of an international socialist party that fights to unite the struggles of students and workers across national boundaries on the basis of a common socialist program for the defense of decent living standards and education for all. We urge students and workers in Puerto Rico to study our program, our history and our principles, and join our movement.



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