

PUERTO RICO ... Statehood or Independence ?

by Nora Santilli

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In a time when the oil monopolies are putting the screws to the people, when the US is experiencing a recession which makes us focus a lot of our energy on making ends meet, and when the revolution in Nicaragua is grabbing the headlines, it is easy to lose sight of other issues which have an important impact on our lives. One such issue is the relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States.

As the only remaining US colony, Puerto Rico is a source of exorbitant profits for the US ruling class, an important "strategic pontoon" in the US military's international network, and a source of embarrassment in the United Nations — a formal vote censuring the US for maintaining its exploitive colonial control over Puerto Rico took place last year. So the ruling class faces a dilemma — how to keep the profits and the military control, while doing an effective face-lift on the ugly facts of colonialism.

REALITIES OF COLONIALISM

The current colonial status of Puerto Rico has proven to be a good deal for the corporations which invest there, and also for those which sell their goods to the Puerto Rican people. Puerto Rico is the largest per capita market for US goods today. This is because the development of the island economy has been twisted to fit the needs of US companies throughout this century.

Puerto Rico's agriculture has been wrecked, so it is forced to import 90% of its food. Production of clothing and consumer goods on the island is mostly directed to export by the US companies which own the factories, so that Puerto Ricans are forced to import clothing and other necessities. Control over significant natural resources is constantly challenged by the colonial master, so Puerto Ricans are unable to exploit them in a way favorable to the development of an independent economy. US companies have chosen to locate in Puerto Rico industries which bring back high profits but provide few jobs, so 30% of the people are forced onto the unemployment roles. Underemployment and low wages make 80% of the people so poor that they are eligible for food stamps, which 50% of the population actually receives.

Many working people in this country resent the fact that they pay taxes which go into paying for food stamps for Puerto Rico. In some cases, this resentment is accompanied by a stereotyped understanding of Puerto Ricans — they are lazy, etc., the usual racist explanation.

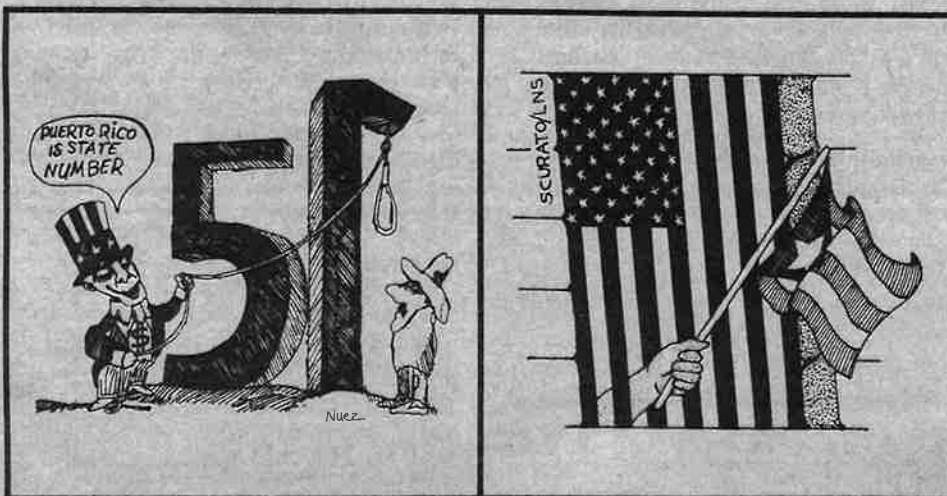
But there are others who resent paying for food stamps because they know that the top US corporations take out \$2 billion in profits from the labor of Puerto Rican workers, while US and Puerto Rican workers pay \$2 billion in taxes into a food stamp program for Puerto Rico. Thus, working people subsidize corporate profits, while the corporations take no responsibility for providing the employment or wages that could get people off food stamps. Puerto Rican workers resent this situation even more than US workers, as they are getting the least pay, while having to stretch their salaries to cover relatives who can't get work at all.

Another side of the colonial reality is that the government of Puerto Rico is in hock to US banks to such an extreme level that the banks are in a position to dictate policy — the way the banks have dealt with the Philadelphia schools, or the New York City fiscal crisis, only a thousand times worse. The govern-

ment is forced to employ 23% of the population to provide jobs, and is sinking deeper and deeper into debt to do so. At the same time that it provides one quarter of the jobs, it doesn't receive taxes from the major companies with investments due to a "tax holiday" which allows US companies to go tax-free because they were willing to invest in "developing" the Puerto Rican economy.

But back to the ruling class and their dilemma, which is that the current colonial situation cannot go on indefinitely. The economic crisis is getting worse in Puerto Rico, the international pressure is getting worse, and the resolution of Puerto Rico's status as a colony can only go one of two ways — statehood or independence. When Jerry Ford was in his final days as a lame-duck president, he made a statement favoring Puerto Rico's introduction into the US as the fifty-first state.

Other politicians have further developed the theme, and some with high



flown phrases about making Puerto Ricans first class citizens. When they talk about first class citizens, they aren't talking about finally allowing them to be first class citizens of their own sovereign nation. They are talking about taking away the last shred of national dignity and identity, and making sure that the oil which is rumored to exist in large quantity off the coast is turned into cash for the pockets of Exxon and Mobil rather than developing a small nation's ability to stabilize its economy.

THE STAKE IN STATEHOOD

There is more than talk about statehood. Many actions of the ruling class speak very clearly. The current administration in Puerto Rico is the traditional statehood party, the Progressive National Party (PNP). This administration has, with the approval of its US backers, changed the tax structure of Puerto Rico to make it more like a state, and has waged an unceasing attack on the two major threats to its statehood drive — the independence movement and the workers' movement.

The US Navy, which has a large role in Puerto Rico, has publicly backed statehood to protect US strategic interests in the Caribbean and Latin America. It has used Puerto Rico in the past to launch attacks on the Dominican Republic.

Private companies, as well as the Puerto Rican development agency, FOMENTO, are placing ads on TV which push "Puerto Rico, USA" and speak highly of the well-educated, dedicated Puerto Rican worker. For the first time in Puerto Rican history, there are two statehood parties — the second being the Democratic Party, headed by Franklin Delano Lopez, and heavily funded from the US. In 1981 there will be a plebiscite in Puerto Rico, a vote to decide between statehood or independence. Between now and then, the independence movement will be subjected to increasing political repression. The push toward statehood is quite serious.

Even if we don't have enough evidence to say that we can be absolutely sure that statehood is the conscious

choice today of the most influential members of the ruling class, we can look at their objective interests and figure out what is the most beneficial for their maintenance of control over Puerto Rico. Independence in a neo-colonial form — which means formal independence with behind the scenes political and economic control still in the hands of the US — is the way that the US deals with many Latin American countries.

But we can see, in the case of Nicaragua, that neo-colonial independence is still a real enough form of independence that progressives can fight for control of their own country. While they may have to fight covert military and political maneuvers by the US, the US isn't in a position to launch a full scale, open attack on the progressives. Neo-colonialism, however terrible it is in most cases, is still a step towards real independence when you are coming from colonialism. Statehood, however, would mean progressives fighting for national indepen-

“fair”. So Blacks in Philly are told that they cannot get x because the Puerto Ricans make it impossible. Poor and working people are pitted against each other to compete for slim resources.

In Puerto Rico itself, the unions and their attempts to further organize the island would be deeply undermined by an acceleration of a process that has begun under the current administration. By upgrading wages of those working for less than minimum wage and simultaneously busting the unions and bringing down the wages of organized workers, a uniformly unlivable situation is created, in which everyone works for a wage below what it takes to make ends meet. First class citizens free to do anything but protect their standard of living, have a say in health and safety, or build up the economy on a rational basis rather than to suit the needs of US companies.

WHAT SOLIDARITY MEANS

The people of Puerto Rico clearly bear the main brunt of colonialism, and would be the main victims of statehood. But both workers and poor people in the US would be hurt as well. The actions taken by the government of the US, which represent the interests of the military and the big companies, are made in the name of the US people.

We saw during the Viet Nam war that we can have an impact on US policy even when the government would rather ignore us. It is important that people in this country begin to take an active role in preventing the statehood drive from being successful — in support of the rights of the Puerto Rican people, but also on behalf of the rights of working people in this country. This is the meaning of solidarity — there isn't a significant different between a healthy support of the rights of workers in this country and the rights of people in another country which is oppressed by US imperialism. If this solidarity isn't actively developed, we will have allowed another defeat for the working class and for democracy.

The Puerto Rico Solidarity Committee (PRSC) is an organization dedicated to solidarity between the people of the US and Puerto Rico. It has members with a wide range of political viewpoints and exists in a number of cities across the US. It is the organization which provides the best way to translate a feeling of solidarity into concrete and effective action. It is open to all people who favor the independence of Puerto Rico.

The perspective on statehood which I have put forward here — that it represents the main danger to the people of Puerto Rico today and that it is the option most in the interests of the US ruling class — is one that many of us in the PRSC hold to. We are discussing the question of statehood throughout the PRSC as part of a debate leading up to our national conference in July. Our national strategy for solidarity work with Puerto Rico in the next two years will either be centered on this position, or we will continue along in a situation in which lack of clarity on the options of the US ruling class will make our work lack the focus and coherence we need, a problem that we all agree has hampered our work.

The PWOC is represented on the National Board of the PRSC, and plays an active role in national leadership of the organization. The PWOC holds that it is imperative that the PRSC take a stand that statehood is the main danger, and that our program and strategy for the coming period reflect this reality. This is not any two year period — it is the two year period leading up to the plebiscite mentioned earlier, and a failure to act decisively in the coming period objectively means that we are capitulating to the aims of the US ruling class. We may find ourselves in the position, in 1981, of not having made a dent in the move towards statehood, if we fail to take a strong position now.