

New Unionism in Puerto Rico

LABOR LEADER SPEAKS HERE

There is a new labor movement developing in Puerto Rico -- a movement dedicated to "new trade unionism", or unionism which truly represents the needs and wishes of the workers.

"We who are leaders in these new trade unions teach the workers that *they* are the union, and that the union is only as strong as the unity and participation that exists among the rank and file. . .

. . . Our movement is a real threat to the American government and its puppet, the Commonwealth Government of Puerto Rico, because these governments represent the interests of big business. They are afraid of our new trade union movement and so they are doing everything they can to crush it."

This was the message brought to us from Puerto Rico by Lydia Grant, Secretary of the National Public Employees Association in Puerto Rico and a member of the Federation of Puerto Rican Women. Ms. Grant came to Philadelphia on March 21st and 22nd as part of a labor delegation sent by the United Workers Movement (MOU).

The tour was sponsored by the Puerto Rican Solidarity Committee, an organization dedicated to building support in the US for the national liberation of Puerto Rico, and for the self determination of the Puerto Rican people.

The purpose of the tour was to inform the US labor movement about the real situation of Puerto Rican workers, and to rally support for the developing resistance movement there.

RECESSION DEVASTATES PUERTO RICO

The situation in Puerto Rico is indeed a grim one. The recession has been even more disastrous to Puerto Rican workers than to workers in the US. Unemployment figures that include discouraged workers and part-time workers are somewhere between 40 and 50%. Those who are lucky enough to be working receive wages one-third lower than here in the US on the same job, while the cost of living is much higher than in N.Y.C.!!

Meanwhile the labor movement in Puerto Rico is under attack and the blows are coming from all directions. The colonial government, under the firm control of US big business, has passed and is passing laws which seriously cripple the attempts to organize so-called "public-sector" workers, which includes 27% of the workforce.

Progressive union leaders are being jailed, beaten and harassed, strikers are questioned by the FBI and beat up by the police on the picket lines, and the US National Guard has been called in to intervene during strikes.

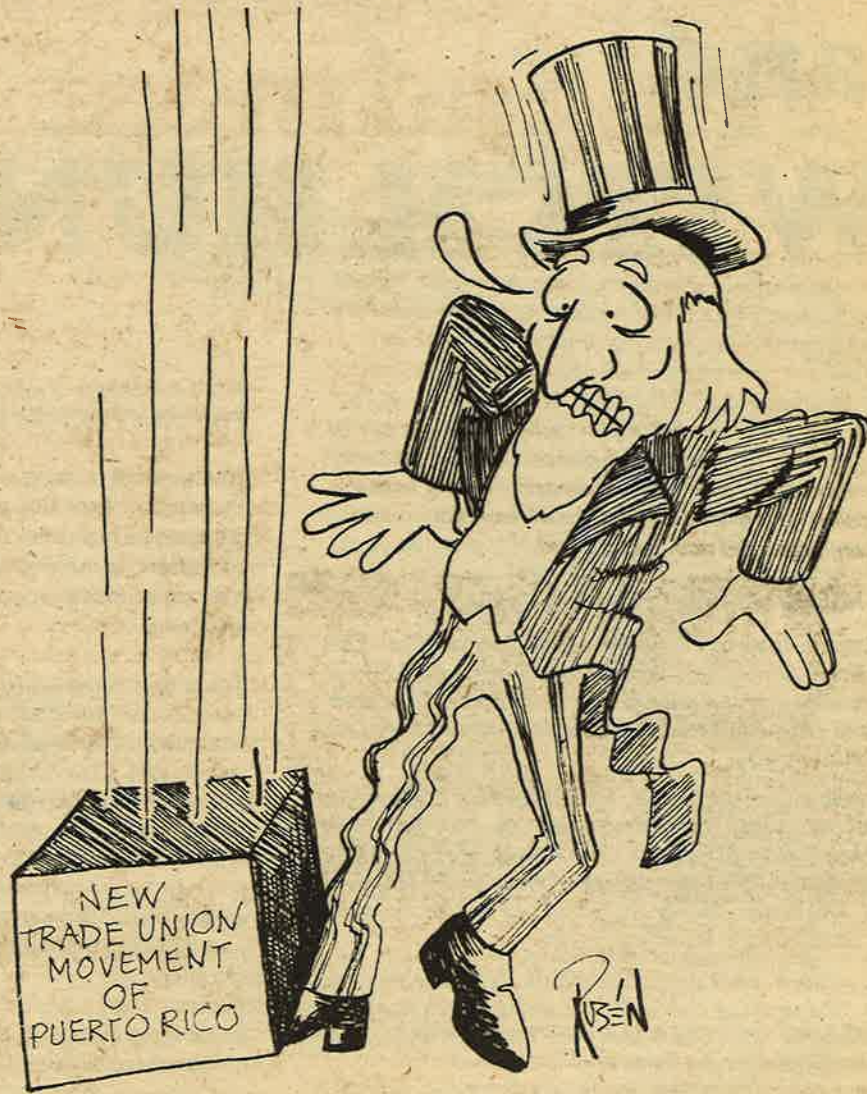
The NLRB has used its power to defeat major strikes and to break the backs of the progressive unions. Strikebreaking by professional hiring firms has been supported and manufacturers have been defended in their refusal to negotiate. Legitimate certification votes have been juggled around to give US based international unions the victory even when they lost.

AFL-CIO BACKS UP COLONIALISM

How have our AFL-CIO leaders responded to this situation? These "international" unions have cooperated with Puerto Rican industry (most of which is US financed) to insure "labor peace" -- a polite phrase to cover a policy of collaboration with management, coupled with repression of the rank and file. In many situations, AFL-CIO leaders sent down to Puerto Rico to "represent" Puerto Rican workers don't even know Spanish!

But the Puerto Rican workers are fighting back against these conditions. The United Workers Movement was organized in 1972 with the goal of uniting the progressive trade union movement in the defense of Puerto Rican workers. At this point the MOU is a labor federation of more than 40 member unions and over 100 locals. It represents 18% of organized labor in Puerto Rico, and it is growing every day. The MOU includes both independent unions and some locals in the AFL-CIO.

When possible, the MOU encourages workers to work within the international unions in order to turn them into real class struggle organizations -- that is, organizations that take seriously their responsibility to represent the working class.



Otherwise, and in most cases, the MOU has found that the international unions are so wedded to the policies of collaboration with big business that it is necessary to sweep them aside and form new "independent" unions, unions that will represent the special interests of Puerto Rican workers.

While the MOU is bound to no particular political party, its leadership understands the importance of developing the political strength of the working class and of challenging the capitalist system which keeps workers begging for a few crumbs from the desert table of the ruling class.

"You must understand that independence from the domination of the US government

and of US business is a central question for workers in Puerto Rico," Grant explained.

We in the US have a special responsibility to help our Puerto Rican brothers and sisters in their struggle. It is in our name that the US government carries out its repressive policies.

We must fight to get our unions to take a stand against new anti-worker laws such as the Personnel Law and the Helfend Bill, both of which limit the right of Puerto Rican public sector workers to organize into effective unions. We must get our unions and all American workers to support the rights of Puerto Ricans to develop their own organizations in Puerto Rico and to oppose all forms of discrimination against Spanish workers here in the US as well.

MEMBER of PUERTO RICAN SOCIALIST PARTY ASSASSINATED

Santiago Mari Pesquera, a member of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, and the 24 year old son of the Party's general secretary, Juan Mari Bras, was assassinated in Puerto Rico on Thursday, March 25th. His body was found in a car parked along a deserted mountain highway outside the city of Caguas. He had been shot once in the head.

The assassination was symptomatic of intensified political repression of the Puerto Rican independence movement by the agents of US imperialism. The PSP has been subject to increasing reactionary violence in recent months.

During the week previous to Pesquera's murder, shots had been fired into the home of Rosa Mercedes Mari, a daughter of Mari Bras and a smoke bomb was thrown into the PSP's central committee offices. These were just two of at least ten attacks on PSP members or offices that have taken place in recent years -- all similarly uninvestigated by the police.

This murder coincided with Juan Mari Bras' journey to meet with members of the United Nations Decolonization Committee in New York. Last fall the US State Department had vigorously worked to keep Puerto Rico from being taken up by this Committee. They informed committee members that a vote in favor of considering Puerto Rico would be considered as "an hostile act" and would be treated accordingly.

But the US imperialists will never be able to turn back the growing strength of the independence movement even if they continue to step up their campaign of assassinations. The Puerto Rican people have already given many martyrs to the cause of freedom and independence.

Santiago Mari Pesquera joins the ranks of heroes such as those who were gunned down in the Ponce Massacre on March 21st, 1937. And we are sure that Pesquera shared the sentiments of Bolivar Marquez who had made his living by selling bread in the streets. Dying, he wrote in his own blood:

"LONG LIVE THE REPUBLIC. DEATH TO THE ASSASSINS!"



The Independent Union of Telephone Workers (UIET) in Puerto Rico waged a 102 day strike last spring and summer. The Telephone Company has unsuccessfully tried to destroy this militant union.