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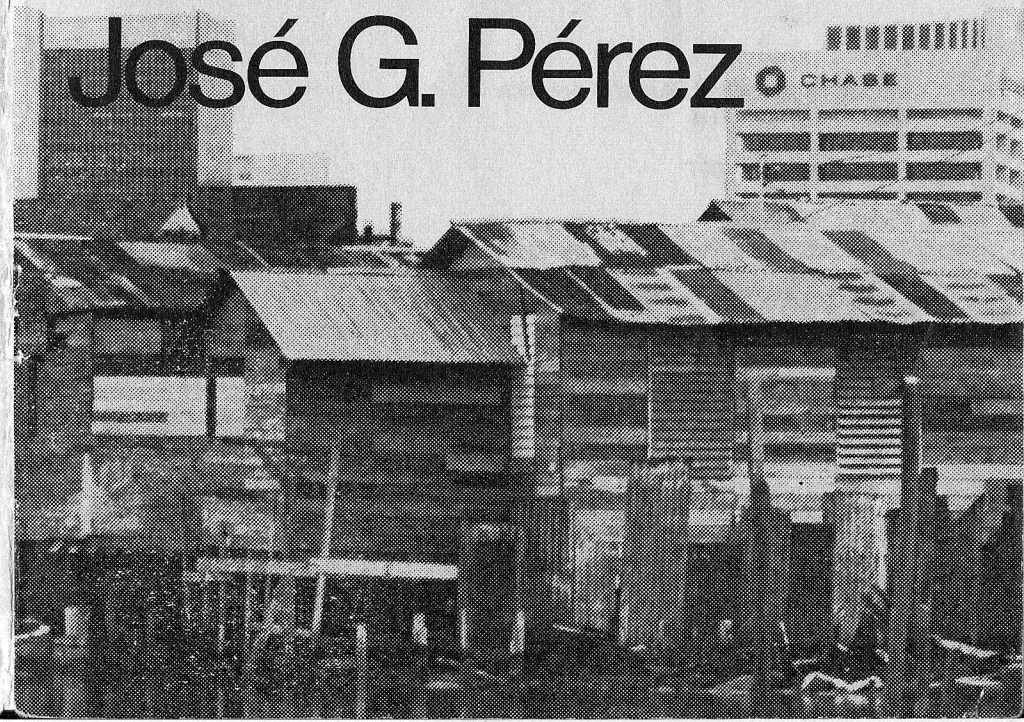
# Puerto Rico:

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## U.S. Colony in the Caribbean

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drive down the minimum wage, reduce health and safety protection on the job, and undercut even further the right of Puerto Rican workers to organize in unions and to strike.

For many years federal law allowed lower minimum wages in Puerto Rico than in this country, but protests from the labor movement finally forced Congress to make them the same. Under the proposed compact, the Puerto Rican government would be free to lower the minimum wage on the island once again.

The real losers in this whole process will be the Puerto Rican masses, whose desire to control their own destiny is getting short shrift amidst all the rhetoric about "maximum of self-government."

The urgent economic and social needs of the Puerto Rican people are totally ignored. To the extent that the compact proposal represents any economic changes, it will only make Puerto Rico more dependent on the United States, making it even easier for the giant U.S. monopolies to extract profits from the superexploited island.

Washington has no right to dictate—or even discuss!—how much self-government Puerto Rico should have. That is a matter for the Puerto Rican people themselves to discuss and decide.

If Congress were really interested in ensuring that the "free and sovereign will" of the Puerto Rican people is respected, there is only one way to do it.

Simply pass a law repealing the 1950 Federal Relations Act, and renounce any measure of control over Puerto Rico. U.S. police, courts, military bases, and other agencies should be withdrawn immediately, and U.S. corporate holdings turned over to the Puerto Rican government.

Only under those conditions can the Puerto Rican people begin to determine for themselves, free of outside interference, what type of government they want and what relations—if any—their government will maintain with the United States.

laws describing Puerto Rico. The inclusion of this phrase, the Advisory Group concedes, "has provided one of the most telling rhetorical arguments raised . . . in endeavoring to prove that Puerto Rico is still a colony 'belonging to' a colonialist United States."

Another cosmetic change is the transference of legal title to state property to the San Juan government. Currently, all such property is formally owned by the United States, although land not being used by the federal government is controlled by the Puerto Rican government. Now, all will be "owned" by Puerto Rico—except that the United States gets to go on using the land for military bases, federal offices, and other purposes without paying one cent in rent to the new "owner."

Then there are a number of proposals that, while appearing to be significant, are in fact only more window dressing.

One of these is a clause specifying that the compact can only be altered by a joint decision of the United States and Puerto Rico. Not only does the inclusion of the U.S. violate in principle the right of Puerto Rico to control its own destiny; in practice, it wouldn't offer Puerto Ricans any say, since there is a well-established principle of U.S. law that Congress can change or repeal any act it passes.

Another proposal is a long and convoluted procedure for passing federal laws for the island. What it amounts to is that a law passed in the United States must specifically say it applies to Puerto Rico, rather than applying automatically as most laws do today. It also specifies that the Puerto Rican government gets to have a special hearing if it objects to a law, but Congress still has the final say.

This has been presented in some U.S. newspapers as a kind of veto power over federal legislation, which is false. It amounts to nothing more than the right to lobby. The U.S. government retains the right to *unilaterally* impose laws on Puerto Rico, irrespective of the wishes of the Puerto Rican government or people.

Another such proposal is the addition of a Puerto Rican nonvoting delegate to the Senate. Similarly, it is proposed to add Puerto Rican "observers" to U.S. trade delegations.

Finally, there are some proposals to extend the Puerto Rican government's power in a few areas, giving it "exclusive jurisdiction" over minimum wages, labor relations, and occupational health and safety.

The reason for this is that Washington wants the San Juan administration to have more power to attack the working class: to

Nothing could be more ironic for Puerto Ricans than the celebration of 200 years of American independence. At the same time that ceremonies, TV programs, and magazine articles were marking the bicentennial of the revolution that freed the American colonies, the rulers of the United States were once more discussing what to do with their island possession in the Caribbean.

Such leading voices of big business as *Time* magazine, the *New York Times*, and *Barron's* (published by Dow Jones) have had major articles on this problem. And in January 1976 the U.S. Congress began debating a "Compact of Permanent Union Between Puerto Rico and the United States," rephrasing once more the laws that define the island's status.

What's bothering the representatives of Wall Street? Puerto Rico, after two decades of modest economic growth, is immersed in an economic crisis that most North Americans could hardly imagine, with real unemployment going as high as 40 percent. The concern among U.S. rulers, as *Barron's* put it, is that "political turmoil can't be far behind." Indeed, political turmoil is already there. Not only are strikes and protests against layoffs and cutbacks occurring, but—for the first time since the 1930s—the movement for independence is gaining wide support among the organized labor movement of Puerto Rico.

To understand the economic crisis and political ferment on the island, the recurring debates over Puerto Rico in the United Nations, and the maneuvers in the U.S. Congress, it is necessary to begin from one simple fact, which the capitalist press and politicians don't like to admit: Puerto Rico is a colony of the United States.

Not a colony in some new or stretched sense of the term, but a colony in the classical pattern—a country ruled by another country; a nation that cannot make its own laws, decide its own foreign relations, or control its own economic affairs.

And the "Compact of Permanent Union" is merely the latest in a long series of attempts to cover up that imperialist relationship before the public opinion of the world, a world full of newly independent nations and national liberation movements.

This article will trace the history of that colonial relationship, what it has done to the Puerto Rican people, and their long record of struggle to control their own destiny.

## From One Oppressor to Another

Puerto Rico is an island with a population of 3 million. Its strategic location in the Caribbean, near transatlantic shipping routes to Central and South America, has played a large part in its history ever since Columbus lost his way en route to India and ran into the Western Hemisphere.

The Puerto Rican people of today originated from three cultures: the indigenous population, the Spanish colonial settlers, and the African slaves brought by the Spanish. For four centuries, until 1898, Puerto Rico was under Spanish occupation. The rulers of the Spanish empire prized it as a military base and as a key link in the chain of ports from Spain to its colonies in the New World. The Spanish ruled through an absolute military-church dictatorship and brutally suppressed uprisings by slaves, Indians, and peasants.

In the early 1800s nationalism began to rise up as a force in Puerto Rico, as it did in many other countries in the Western Hemisphere at that time. A native culture had developed, distinct from that of Spain, containing elements from the three cultures mentioned earlier. For the first time, people began to talk of Puerto Ricans, or *criollos*—the native-born population—as a distinct people. A political debate arose on the question of status vis-a-vis Spain.

It is worth outlining this debate on status, which dominated the island's political life through the 1800s. Although the colonial masters of Puerto Rico have changed, the same debate has continued uninterrupted, and is being conducted with increasing intensity today.

Three broad currents were involved. The assimilationists, or, as they called themselves, “unconditionalists,” were for complete Spanish rule over the country. The second current, the autonomists, reflected the rising nationalist aspirations of the Puerto Rican people, but in a distorted way. They supported a permanent connection with Spain together with some degree of local self-rule. The *independentistas*, the third current, were the supporters of complete separation.

In 1868 Ramón Emeterio Betances led a revolt for independence known as El Grito de Lares, which is commemorated yearly by large proindependence demonstrations on the island. Betances had organized a network of clubs throughout Puerto Rico that planned to carry out a coordinated uprising. The plan was discovered by the Spanish and when the revolt occurred it was crushed.

The cops and courts have also intervened heavily against strikes in the private sector.

A growing number of unions are now led by *independentistas* of various groups. Of the 114 unions on the island, about 40 are affiliated with the Movimiento Obrero Unido (MOU—United Workers Movement), which is headed by a leader of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party.

The penetration of independence ideas into the island's labor movement is particularly significant since it is only the working class that has the social power to take on Washington effectively. And it is occurring at a time of deepening unrest in the North American labor movement, which has the potential of weakening the grip of U.S. imperialism from another angle.

## The 'Compact'

It is in this context that the “Compact of Permanent Union Between Puerto Rico and the United States” is being proposed in the U.S. Congress.

That document is the product of a joint Puerto Rican-North American Advisory Group established by President Nixon and Governor Hernández Colón in 1973. If approved by Congress and signed into law by the U.S. president, it would be submitted to a referendum of the Puerto Rican people. It would replace the Puerto Rican Federal Relations Act of 1950, which established the present setup.

The essence of the compact is that it continues, virtually unchanged, the complete U.S. domination of the island.

It recodifies provisions of the current laws giving the United States total control over military and foreign policy matters, currency, immigration, and citizenship. It keeps Puerto Rico under the jurisdiction of most federal regulatory agencies. U.S. courts and cops would retain their authority in Puerto Rico, and the highest arbiter of the meaning and constitutionality of laws would remain the U.S. Supreme Court.

The language of the compact is designed to cover this up. It hypocritically speaks of the “free and sovereign will” of the Puerto Rican people—in a law that must be discussed, debated, amended, and approved by the United States government before the people of Puerto Rico can even have a vote on it.

The compact changes the English-language name of the government of Puerto Rico to “Free Associated State,” which it already has been in Spanish for twenty-five years.

It drops the words “belonging to the United States” from U.S.

tightening and sacrifice are adding a class polarization to the growing political ferment in Puerto Rico. There is already a polarization around the status issue, spurred by the worldwide colonial revolution.

### New Rise of the Independence Struggle

Beginning in the mid-1960s, the struggle for independence intensified. The *independentistas* made much headway through actions around issues such as the draft, U.S. target practice on the islands of Vieques and Culebra, student-faculty-employee control of the University of Puerto Rico, imperialist exploitation of copper, and environmental pollution.

A prominent role was played by the PIP, the Puerto Rican Independence Party, which was becoming revitalized and increasingly radicalized in this period. Another important group was the Movimiento Pro Independencia (MPI—Pro-Independence Movement), which had been founded in 1959. After much evolution, the MPI became the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP) in 1971.

On September 12, 1971—the eightieth anniversary of Albizu Campos's birth—80,000 people marched through San Juan demanding independence. It was the largest such demonstration in the history of the island. Proportionately, a demonstration of similar size in the United States would be five or six million.

Colonial officials like to cite the results of the 1972 election, in which the PIP and other independence parties achieved only about 5 percent of the vote, but this is fraudulent.

Many independence groups—including the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, which is probably the most active—boycotted the balloting for various reasons. In addition, many *independentistas* voted for the Popular Democratic Party in order to oppose the pro-statehood Partido Nuevo Progresista (PNP—New Progressive Party), which had held power the previous four years. Polls among the nearly 500,000 voters between eighteen and twenty-four, for example, showed about one-third supporting independence, yet they overwhelmingly voted for the PPD.

The truth is that no one is sure how many Puerto Ricans favor independence. At the very least it is a large and growing minority.

In recent years, a focus of much activity by independence groups has been a series of bitterly fought strikes. Twice the governor has called out the National Guard—which had not been mobilized since 1950—to help break public employees' strikes.

This movement enjoyed broad support from the Puerto Rican people, especially from the agricultural wage laborers, who made up a large part of the rebel force of 400 men. The demands that were raised by the revolutionaries included the abolition of slavery; freedom of speech, religion, assembly, and the press; the right to have arms; freedom from unreasonable search and seizure; and the right to vote on all taxes and to elect representatives.

The uprising in Lares, although unsuccessful, has provided a continuing inspiration to fighters for Puerto Rican liberation to this day. It was one of the factors that helped force the Spanish government to abolish slavery in 1873.

The decline of the Spanish empire in this period and the rise of the United States as an industrial power tended to weaken Spain's hold on its few remaining colonies. As Puerto Rico increased its trade with the United States, Washington began to explore ways to take over the island. The Spanish countered with greater concessions to the *criollos*.

In 1897, Spain granted Puerto Rico far-reaching autonomy. The reason for this concession was the War for Independence in Cuba, which had militarily defeated the Spanish. The Cuban Revolutionary Party, which led the struggle in Cuba, had a Puerto Rican section, and the liberals who demanded autonomy from Spain threatened to join forces with the revolutionaries if greater self-rule were not granted.

However, there was no time for the new arrangement with Spain to be tested, because a few months later the Spanish-American War broke out, and the United States invaded Cuba, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico.

The invasion of Puerto Rico on July 25, 1898, was led by General Nelson A. Miles. It was Miles who in 1890 had dispatched the troops that carried out the Wounded Knee massacre of Native Americans in South Dakota. He also had played a major role in smashing the Pullman strike in 1894.

By mistake Miles landed on the opposite corner of the island from the Spanish forces, and Spain's surrender offer was already on its way to Washington, so there was virtually no fighting in Puerto Rico.

The general issued a proclamation "To the Inhabitants of Porto Rico" (it took many years for the North Americans to learn to spell the country's name) which stated that the U.S. forces had come "in the cause of liberty, justice, and humanity . . . to bring you protection . . . to promote your prosperity, and to bestow

upon you the immunities and blessings of the liberal institutions of our government.”

A few days earlier, Amos Fiske, an influential business writer, more candidly spelled out the thinking of the U.S. rulers in the editorial pages of the *New York Times*:

“There can be no question about the wisdom of taking possession of the Island of Puerto Rico and keeping it for all time. . . .

“Our need of a foothold in the West Indies for naval purposes has long been recognized. . . .

“The island could be rendered of no small commercial value to us. . . .

“There is no reason why it should not become . . . an especially charming winter resort for denizens of the North.”

Fiske noted that “we are not pledged to give Puerto Rico independence. . . . Besides, it would be much better for her to come at once under the beneficent sway of the United States than to engage in doubtful experiments at self-government.”

### **The Impact of U.S. Rule**

U.S. imperialist domination has shaped two distinct periods in the island’s history, both involving tremendous social and economic hardships for the Puerto Rican people. The initial period extended from the arrival of U.S. forces to the Second World War.

The first year of U.S. rule saw great changes in the economy of the island. Previously, the economy had been based on agriculture and there were many small landholders. The most important crop was coffee, which lent itself to production on a small scale since no heavy machinery or large investments were required. About 40 percent of the land was devoted to this crop. Another 32 percent of the land was used in growing foodstuffs for consumption on the island. Some 15 percent was devoted to sugar and only 1 percent to tobacco.

It should be noted that much of the economy, including 93 percent of the agricultural holdings, was in Puerto Rican hands.

The first dislocating effect of the U.S. occupation was that the coffee industry was wiped out. Because of the U.S. tariff structure, coffee could not be profitably exported to Europe as it had been before. Puerto Rican coffee had to be shipped to the United States in North American freighters, and as a result Puerto Rican coffee was priced out of the U.S. market. The hurricane of 1899 and the devaluation of money carried out by

food every year. Rice is brought from as far away as California because it is more profitable for U.S. investors to speculate in land values on the island than to put the soil to productive use.

The essence of the whole economic picture is revealed in one statistic: profits extracted by foreigners from Puerto Rico in 1974 totaled more than \$1.3 billion, out of a gross national product of \$6.8 billion. One-fifth of the wealth that Puerto Rican workers created that year ended up in U.S. banks.

The balance sheet on Operation Bootstrap shows clearly that those who have benefited the most are the U.S. industrialists and bankers, not the people of Puerto Rico.

But one additional consideration should be taken into account: Operation Bootstrap’s results, such as they were, were made possible by the world economic situation during the twenty-five years following World War II. During that whole period, U.S. capitalism was expanding rapidly, entering markets that had previously been dominated by other imperialists, and facing relatively little competition from European or Japanese capitalists.

That period has now come to a close. This was dramatically illustrated by the simultaneous recessions in most major capitalist countries during 1974-75, the stagnation and inflation that preceded the downturns, and the sluggish economic recovery that the United States is now experiencing.

The international recession had a catastrophic impact on Puerto Rico, as it had on all of the colonial world. Production began to decline in the fiscal year 1973-74 and has continued to dive ever since. The U.S. economy began to climb back upward in the spring of 1975, but there were barely any signs of recovery in Puerto Rico a year later.

The official rate of unemployment set an all-time record on the island in January 1976, reaching the level of 21.9 percent. Real unemployment, including the “discouraged workers,” is estimated to be 40 percent. Over 70 percent of the population was living on food stamps at the end of 1975. The construction industry is “on the verge of collapse,” according to industry officials.

What perspectives are offered to the Puerto Rican people by the servants of Wall Street in San Juan?

Governor Rafael Hernández Colón in his 1976 message to the legislature decreed more cutbacks in public services and more layoffs of government employees, and asked the legislature for a wage freeze for both public and private employees.

The deepening economic crisis and the rulers’ demands for belt-

## Unemployment—the Real Picture

For June 1970, official unemployment was 11 percent, with 92,000 people looking for work. But there were also 253,000—a quarter of a million people—who were “idle”—not employed, not in school, not retired, not disabled, not housewives, not looking for work. These are the so-called discouraged workers, and if they had been counted as unemployed, the real rate would have been 30 percent.

In addition, 35 percent of the labor force in June 1970 was listed as officially “underemployed”—they had only part-time jobs when they wanted full-time work.

Adding all the figures together, about 60 percent of the potential work force of Puerto Rico in 1970 was either unemployed or underemployed.

But that's not all. Many Puerto Ricans have left their homeland and come to live in the barrios of the United States, driven by economic necessity. The bulk of this emigration came after the Second World War, after Operation Bootstrap was already functioning. Estimates vary, but this sector of the Puerto Rican population now constitutes at least a third, and more likely two-fifths, of all Puerto Ricans.

Such unemployment and such miserable incomes breed other social problems, one of the most serious of which is housing. In 1972 there were 225,000 housing units in Puerto Rico that did not meet minimum standards for health and safety. More than 40 percent of the population lived in inadequate or deteriorated housing. There are tens of thousands in San Juan and other parts of the island who are squatters, living in shacks constructed out of tin, cardboard, and plywood, without plumbing or running water, without electricity.

The reason for this widespread poverty is that the Puerto Rican economy is totally in the hands of U.S. capitalists, and what's done and not done is determined by what's profitable for Wall Street.

The accelerated pace of the U.S. takeover is illustrated by the following figures: In 1948, 78 percent of local capital investment projects were in Puerto Rican hands. By 1966, 77 percent were owned by North Americans, and by the early 1970s the figure had reached 88 percent.

This imperialist domination has made Puerto Rico's economic structure completely irrational from the standpoint of human needs. Only 30 percent of the potential farm land is fully used. Yet the island imports hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of

the United States in the process of imposing its own currency on the island meant that the class of small coffee growers was wiped out in one blow rather than in a drawn-out process.

United States monopolies then moved in and gained control over the productive land, inch by inch. The people of the island became dependent on one crop, sugar cane. During the first three decades of U.S. rule, sugar production increased by more than 1,200 percent, most of it controlled by four U.S. corporations. Tobacco also became more important and 80 percent of that crop was controlled by U.S. interests.

Production of these commodities for the U.S. market displaced cultivation of foodstuffs for island consumption, and Puerto Rico became a captive market for U.S. agribusiness.

These shifts in ownership and kind of crop were paralleled by a huge concentration of landed property. By 1940, 80 percent of all farm land was owned by large corporations or landlords with 500 acres or more.

What did this mean for the now-landless peasant, the *agregado* who was working for the sugar companies? From 1899 to 1929 unemployment climbed from 17 percent to 36 percent and, owing to the monoculture of sugar, one-fourth to one-third of the rest of the population was unemployed most of the year.

Prices for food skyrocketed as domestic products were replaced with U.S. imports. By 1930 Puerto Ricans used 94 percent of their income to buy food. The decline of real purchasing power of wages was such that it took Puerto Ricans 104 days of work to buy their food needs for a year, compared with 70 days when the United States first took over.

Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., who became governor of Puerto Rico in 1929, wrote of his first months on the island: “I have seen mothers carrying babies who were little skeletons, I have watched in a class-room thin, pallid, little boys and girls trying to spur their brains to action when their little bodies were underfed. I have seen them trying to study on one scanty meal a day, a meal of a few beans and some rice. I have looked into the kitchens of houses where a handful of beans and plantains were the fare for the entire family.”

Things got worse, much worse, as the depression deepened.

## Colonial Politics

On the governmental and political level, Puerto Rico was under direct military rule for the first two years of the U.S. occupation. In 1900, the U.S. Congress passed the Foraker Act, which set up a

civilian administration. The governor was to be appointed by the U.S. president. In addition there would be an Executive Council made up of eleven people, six of them North Americans and all chosen by the U.S. president.

A local legislature was set up, elected by those Puerto Ricans who could read, write, and pay a poll tax. Since 83 percent of the people were illiterate and most were poor, this body was hardly designed to reflect the sentiments of the oppressed Puerto Rican masses. And even so, the legislature's actions had to be approved by the Executive Council, which acted as both cabinet and upper chamber of the legislature. If a law was approved by the Executive Council it had to be submitted to the governor, who could veto it.

Congress also generously gave itself veto power over the actions of the legislature, and it retained the right to pass any additional legislation it saw fit.

The first party formed under U.S. rule was the Republican Party, founded in 1899, which had an assimilationist perspective. In opposition to this a political bloc emerged in 1904 calling itself the Puerto Rican Union Party. The Union Party's own position was ambiguous; formally, it favored independence, but it said it would be happy with statehood if that were granted, and would settle for some form of local autonomy as a temporary solution. In practice, its main orientation was to work for more self-rule reforms within the colonial context. The party quickly became the dominant force in Puerto Rican politics.

As a result of pressures from the Union Party, Congress in 1912 began to debate a bill changing Puerto Rico's government. Known as the Jones Act, it was not passed until 1917—"as a war measure . . . to insure the loyalty of the Porto Ricans," in the words of a White House spokesperson. Among its main provisions were extension of the right to vote and a popularly elected legislature. In most other respects, the provisions of the Foraker Act were continued.

One major aspect of the legislation was imposition on Puerto Ricans of U.S. citizenship. This was strongly opposed by *independentistas*, both within and outside the Union Party. The act generously permitted Puerto Ricans to decline U.S. citizenship. But if people chose this alternative, they lost their civil rights, such as the right to vote and hold office, and became in effect aliens in their own homeland.

Congress had decided in 1900 that the island was too poor to be worth taxing, and exempted it from internal revenue laws. This provision was retained under the 1917 Jones Act; but instead of a

Beginning in the late 1940s, the Puerto Rican government came up with a development program designed to industrialize Puerto Rico. It was called—in English—"Operation Bootstrap," and in Spanish "Manos a la Obra" (roughly: Get to work).

The idea was that Puerto Rico's main natural resource is plentiful labor—forced to work at substandard wages—and that U.S. manufacturers could be induced to invest heavily in the island.

To sweeten the pot, the government of Puerto Rico exempted U.S. corporations from having to pay any taxes for many years if they established plants on the island. Furthermore, the government facilitated access to buildings, labor training programs, electricity, and water, and looked the other way as manufacturers tore up the countryside and polluted the environment. Through the program, Puerto Rico has been transformed into a highly industrialized country. In 1950 there were 82 factories on the island; by 1960 there were 717, and by 1970 close to 2,000.

Heavy industry, particularly petroleum refining, became the most rapidly expanding sector in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The refineries created jobs for only a few hundred skilled workers, however, and most of these were brought in from the states. The other thing refining was supposed to do for Puerto Rico was encourage the growth of related industries, such as petrochemicals. Instead, after initial processing, the oil is shipped to the United States. About all the Puerto Ricans are left with is the chemical wastes dumped into their water and air.

Real per capita income in Puerto Rico rose by more than 400 percent between 1940 and 1973. Unemployment declined through the late 1960s, reaching an all-time low in 1969 of 10 percent officially unemployed, compared with 15 percent in 1940.

But these statistics—frequently cited by government experts—are extremely one-sided. Along with the growth of overall national income, social inequality has increased. The top 20 percent of families in Puerto Rico receive as much of the total income as the other 80 percent.

Roughly half the population lives in families with incomes below the official U.S. government poverty level. Some 13 percent of the island's families had incomes of less than \$500 in 1973. Wages are one-third to one-half those in the United States for the same work.

Unemployment has also remained quite high, even by official figures. But these figures grossly miscount the unemployed.



Under this relabeled relationship, Puerto Rico's government continued to be deprived of the powers associated with a sovereign state. The United States (through "common defense") went on using parts of Puerto Rico as bombing ranges, as facilities for nuclear weapons, as air and military bases. This still accounts for 13 percent of the island's territory, including much of the best land.

Puerto Ricans continued to be drafted—to fight in Korea, Vietnam, Santo Domingo, or wherever the United States wanted to send them.

Travel into or out of the country, naturalization, and customs are all still controlled by the United States. Without a license from the Federal Communications Commission there cannot be a broadcasting tower in Puerto Rico for a TV or radio station.

Anything having to do with nuclear energy is regulated by U.S. agencies. Labor relations are handled by the National Labor Relations Board—"national" meaning the United States, not Puerto Rico. The island's mail is in the hands of the U.S. Postal Service. The money of Puerto Rico is U.S. dollars.

The FBI, CIA, and other U.S. secret police agencies function freely in Puerto Rico. In May 1975, the FBI revealed that one of its notorious "Cointelpro" harassment operations had been directed at Puerto Rican independence groups. Complementing the illegalities of the FBI, there is the legal repression carried out through U.S. courts—in English. And the victims are sent to U.S. prisons.

The United States government is the Puerto Rican government, too, whether the people like it or not. Puerto Ricans do not vote for president, for the House of Representatives, or for the Senate. Puerto Rico has one delegate to the U.S. Congress who can speak but has no vote.

Washington got this "commonwealth" fraud endorsed by the United Nations. In 1952 it pushed a resolution through the General Assembly declaring that Puerto Rico's status was an internal problem of the United States. A later resolution announced that Puerto Rico was now "self-governing."

But Puerto Rico remained what it had been for almost five centuries—a colony.

### 'Operation Bootstrap'

The changes in governmental structure after World War II were accompanied by changes in the economy that left the island more subject to the economic tyranny of Wall Street than ever before.

tax in money, a tax in human lives was instituted—the U.S. draft. Under this colonial blood tax, countless thousands of Puerto Ricans have been killed "making the world safe for democracy" everywhere from Vietnam and Korea to Europe, while being deprived of democracy in their own homeland.

A significant factor in determining U.S. policy toward Puerto Rico was the rabid racism of the American rulers. For example, during the debate on the Foraker Act in 1900, one senator spoke against any idea that Puerto Rico could be given statehood, saying Puerto Ricans were "a heterogeneous mass of mongrels" and "savages addicted to head-hunting and cannibalism."

In 1913 Judge Peter Hamilton wrote his friend President Woodrow Wilson: "The mixture of black and white in Porto Rico threatens to create a race of mongrels of no use to anyone; a race of Spanish-American talkers. A governor from the South, or with knowledge of Southern remedies for that trouble, could, if a wise man, do much. . . ."

Part and parcel of this racism was the policy of forced cultural assimilation the United States attempted to impose on Puerto Rico. English became the official language of instruction in the schools, and its use in commercial life became widespread. A vehicle for this cultural pressure was the growing layer of Puerto Ricans known as *pitiyanquis* (little Yankees)—as one writer described them, "those hundreds of insular government employees who preach Americanization of the country, led by the sole self-interest of their greedy stomachs."

In a recent interview conducted at the federal penitentiary in Alderson, West Virginia, Puerto Rican patriot Lolita Lebrón described what it was like during this period:

"As a little girl I went to school, where the first thing I learned was, after the bell rang and the line was formed, to place my little hand upon my heart to salute and pledge allegiance to the flag. I learned afterward that the flag was the highest symbol of the nation and that the nation was not Puerto Rico, but a faraway country named the United States of America. We were not taught the meaning of the words. Our education was taught in the English language by Puerto Rican teachers who had a strange sound or accent. . . . Our fiestas were Lincoln's Day, Washington's Day, Columbus Day, Christmas Day, New Year's Day. . . ."

These policies were the object of constant protests and created bitter resentment against the North American regime.

After passage of the Jones Act the Union Party formally abandoned its proindependence position. This led to a split and

the formation in 1922 of the Nationalist Party. Unlike the Union Party, the Nationalist Party was unconditionally for independence.

During the late 1920s there was a rise of independence sentiment on the island in reaction to the increasing U.S. economic and social domination. The Union Party was shaken again by the status question, leading to its breakup in 1932.

### **The Socialist Party's Evolution**

The Socialist Party had been founded in 1915, after the Puerto Rican labor movement had experimented with running candidates within the capitalist parties and found this approach fruitless.

In its early days the Socialist Party had various currents. Its left wing was led by, among others, Manuel Rojas, who served as the party's general secretary from its founding until the early 1920s. This wing had revolutionary positions on two crucial questions. It supported independence for Puerto Rico, and it advocated political independence for the working class, rejecting coalitions with capitalist parties.

The best-known leader of the SP's right wing was Santiago Iglesias Pantín, head of the Federación Libre de los Trabajadores (FLT—Free Federation of the Workers), the trade union group in which the party had its base. The right wing favored annexation by the U.S.

The influence of radical ideas in the party's early period was so strong that even Iglesias Pantín, in a speech at the 1919 convention, felt compelled to make several favorable references to the Russian revolution of 1917 and the example of the soviets.

At this convention the party decided not to take a stand on the question of political status. This only served to give a blank check to the right wing. On the other hand, a principled position against blocs with capitalist parties was adopted.

It should be noted that among the arguments used by the right wing against the independence idea was their experience with procapitalist *independentista* politicians. The FLT had run candidates on the Union Party slate in the 1904 elections. Several had been elected to the legislature, where they proposed social reforms. Their most outspoken opponents were also the principal advocates of independence, most notably José de Diego.

The SP moved to the right during the 1920s, becoming a servant of the American corporations despite its working class roots. However, many radical workers remained loyal to it, seeing

They were able to liberate one town, Jayuya, so the incident is frequently called the Jayuya rebellion.

Small in numbers and poorly armed, the Nationalists were crushed within a few days. A sweeping witch-hunt followed, with arrests of communists, *independentistas*, trade union leaders, and other activists. The number of people imprisoned numbered in the thousands—some say as high as 10,000—although at most a few hundred took part in the rebellion. Many were later indicted and convicted under a Puerto Rican anticommunist law that was based on the Smith Act.

Many Nationalists spent long years in prison. The last of those imprisoned in Puerto Rico were granted amnesty only in 1972. Albizu Campos was finally released when on the verge of death. He died on April 21, 1965.

When news of the 1950 battles reached the U.S., two Nationalists living there tried to respond by attacking a symbol of American power. One was killed in a shoot-out with guards at the Blair House, where President Truman was living at the time. A similar armed protest took place in the chamber of the House of Representatives in March 1954.

The five patriots imprisoned for these incidents—Lolita Lebrón, Oscar Collazo, Rafael Cancel Miranda, Irving Flores, and Andrés Figueroa Cordero—are still in U.S. penitentiaries, and as far as is known are currently the longest-held political prisoners in the Western Hemisphere. Their case has received worldwide attention, and the demand to free them has mass support among the Puerto Rican people.

### **Commonwealth Proclaimed**

In 1951, with the roundup of the government's opponents completed and the island under virtual martial law, the plebiscite on the drafting of a Puerto Rican constitution was held, and passed by a vote of about two to one. The proindependence groups—even the Puerto Rican Independence Party, at the time a very moderate electoral group which was the second strongest party at the polls—boycotted the vote, so the exact extent of opposition to the new colonial relation with the United States is not known.

A Constituent Assembly was called together, and a constitution drafted. On July 25, 1952—the fifty-fourth anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico—the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico (or as it is called in Spanish, the Free Associated State) was proclaimed.

after the war, as well as the cold war with the Soviet Union which began in 1947, made it obvious to Washington that a more disguised form of colonial domination was desirable.

As early as 1943, Roosevelt had recommended to the U.S. Congress that Puerto Ricans be allowed to elect their own governor. This was granted shortly after the war. It reflected a growing conviction among U.S. rulers that "Puerto Ricans can now govern themselves"—that is, that the leaders of the Popular Democrats, by far the biggest party on the island, were reliable supporters of imperialist domination.

Soon after the war's end, the PPD formally abandoned its proindependence plank. A layer of party members dissatisfied with this change went on to become a major component of a new formation, the Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño (PIP—Puerto Rican Independence Party).

Around this same period, English was dropped as the main language of instruction in the schools in response to widespread resistance, and other similar reforms were instituted.

In 1948 Luis Muñoz Marín became Puerto Rico's first elected governor under U.S. rule. In 1950, Congress decided on a further change and passed Public Law 600, which delegated to Puerto Ricans the power to establish a local government administration.

Following the approval of this law, preparations began on the island to hold a yes-or-no referendum on whether Puerto Rico should have its own constitution. An important part of these preparations was repression against *independentistas*, who were sure to oppose the maneuver.

A major target was the Nationalist Party, which since Albizu Campos's return to the island from a U.S. prison in late 1947 had been revitalized and was beginning to gain force.

In early 1950, the Nationalists say, their party found out that the U.S. government and its San Juan puppets were planning to carry out a major repressive drive against their organization.

On October 27, 1950, the crackdown began, with the arrest of two carloads of Nationalists. This was followed by a police raid two nights later at the home of the president of the Nationalist unit in the city of Ponce.

A few hours after this, in the early hours of October 30, the Nationalists learned the police were heading for the farm belonging to the mother of the president of the Ponce Nationalists, and they followed them there. Shooting broke out between the Nationalists and police, and when news of this came over the radio, Albizu Campos's followers all over the island revolted.

the SP as the party of their class. It grew very rapidly with the extension of the franchise under the Jones Act.

When the Union Party broke up in 1932, forces in its left wing formed the Liberal Party, with a proindependence position. To counter this rival, the SP joined in a coalition with the Republican Party. This bloc was the dominant electoral force on the island through the 1930s, and has gone down in Puerto Rican history as the epitome of political corruption and subservience to U.S. interests, particularly the sugar monopolies.

### The Nationalist Party Under Attack

In 1932 the Nationalist Party set out to conduct a mass campaign for independence, under the leadership of Pedro Albizu Campos, who had become president of the party in 1930. As the depression deepened, thousands turned to the Nationalists for radical solutions. In 1934, for example, striking sugarcane cutters invited Albizu Campos to participate in the strike leadership.

As it won a mass following, the party became a target of repression. On October 24, 1935, in a clash with police outside the University of Puerto Rico, four Nationalists were killed. The cops said the Nationalists fired first. On the island, however, they call it the Río Piedras Massacre.

In response to this, the Nationalist Party began organizing itself in paramilitary fashion. Guards were posted at Albizu Campos's home—not without reasons, as there were four attacks made against the house, all of them beaten back by the Nationalists.

On February 23, 1936, the North American chief of police responsible for the Río Piedras Massacre was killed on the streets of San Juan. Two young Nationalists were arrested on the spot, taken to police headquarters, and killed. There were more demonstrations, more clashes with police.

In April 1936 the top leaders of the Nationalist Party were indicted for conspiracy to overthrow the government of the United States. When the trial was held, the seven Puerto Ricans and five Americans on the jury became deadlocked. Another jury was chosen, composed of ten North Americans and only two Puerto Ricans. The Nationalists were convicted and sentenced to long prison terms.

The government then banned all demonstrations. The one exception to this policy occurred in Ponce in March 1937, where the local authorities gave permission to the Nationalists to hold a rally. It was scheduled for March 21, Palm Sunday. But as the

march was about to begin, the police revoked the permit.

The national hymn of Puerto Rico was played, the crowd cheered, and the march began. The police opened up with all the weapons at their disposal on the unarmed Nationalists, killing 20 people and wounding between 150 and 200.

Officials once again claimed the Nationalists had fired the first shot. An independent commission of inquiry, composed of prominent Puerto Ricans, including editors of three daily newspapers, and chaired by an official of the American Civil Liberties Union, concluded that the people of Puerto Rico had properly described the occurrence as the Massacre of Ponce.

The governor of Puerto Rico, who was responsible for the massacre, ordered that the Nationalist survivors be charged with murder. Local officials at first refused to comply. But within a year almost all the leading Nationalists were in prison on various charges, and the party was nearly destroyed.

In addition to using repression against the Nationalists, Washington also granted certain economic concessions to try to defuse the explosive situation. They sought the collaboration of the Liberals by involving them in New Deal poverty programs.

The U.S. strategy began to pay off in 1938, when Luis Muñoz Marín founded the Partido Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic Party). Muñoz Marín, son of the Union Party's founder, had been the leader of the most radical wing of the Liberal Party, and had even considered himself a socialist for a while. The PPD absorbed many reformist-oriented radicals and *independentistas*. Although its official platform called for independence, Muñoz Marín said this was "not an issue" at the moment and limited himself to calling for economic reforms.

The new party swept the 1940 elections. This coincided with the desire of the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration to see Puerto Rican politicians play a larger role in fronting for U.S. rule. The PPD became a vehicle for supplying local government functionaries.

Meanwhile, the Second World War had begun in Europe, and the war-induced economic upturn in the United States alleviated the economic situation somewhat. A new North American governor was appointed—Rexford Tugwell, a member of Roosevelt's "Brain Trust," who was more flexible than his predecessors. This combination of factors began to undercut the political ferment that had marked the 1930s.

Why had Puerto Rico failed to achieve independence during that decade? I think that the opportunity certainly existed, and even U.S. government officials admit that the majority favored

independence. What was missing was a leadership that could organize the masses to carry out the task.

The Nationalist Party, in addition to being hard-hit by repression, did not have a social program that could consistently mobilize masses of working and oppressed people under its banner.

The reformist Socialist Party was no alternative. By the 1930s, it was busily administering the colony on behalf of the sugar corporations.

Puerto Rico also had a Communist Party, founded in 1934. Following the Moscow-dictated line of "people's front" with the capitalist liberals, it allied itself with the Popular Democrats and with Governor Tugwell.

The line of the Puerto Rican Communist Party during World War II, which was the period of its greatest influence, is exemplified in a 1942 pamphlet *¡Contra Hitler en el mundo! ¡Contra el hambre en PR!* (Against Hitler in the world! Against hunger in PR!). As summarized in *Lucha Obrera en Puerto Rico*, edited by A.G. Quintero Rivera, this pamphlet, which consists of a report adopted at a CP convention, "proposes a policy of suspending strikes and putting to rest the struggle for independence until the end of the war against Hitler. Proposes to support Tugwell and the North American army; criticizes the Nationalist Party."

In contrast, the Nationalist Party refused to support the U.S. oppressor's war effort, rejecting the liberal propaganda of the imperialist "democracies," which the Stalinists worldwide peddled as good coin. That year, 1942, there was a big roundup of Nationalists who had signed a statement saying they refused to serve in the U.S. armed forces.

The Communist Party of Puerto Rico essentially presented itself as a "loyal opposition" to the existing colonial regime. So reliable was it considered by the U.S. imperialists that a top leader of the CP was offered a high post in the Ministry of Labor in 1942.

## Referendum and Repression

During the 1940s, Washington made a fundamental reorientation in its methods of control and exploitation of Puerto Rico.

The island's importance as a military base increased with the arrival of the Second World War. This put a premium on obtaining social stability to facilitate its use as a fortress. At the same time, the great rise of the colonial revolution during and