

Labor strikes: a historical view

Puerto Rico has had its shares of labor unrest throughout its history. Have these strikes produced the results desired by the unions and community leaders who initiated them?

Given that many strikes have been used to protest the current administration's policies regarding how to balance the budget, we believe that a historical perspective is important to understand if these initiatives do, in fact, achieve their desired result. Here we analyze the strike which occurred at the Puerto Rico Glass Corporation in 1942, and which we believe has some relevance to today's labor unrest.

On May 12, 1943, construction began on Puerto Rico Glass, a state sponsored venture. This factory was located in the Amelia neighborhood of Guaynabo. The enthusiasm displayed by Teodoro Moscoso, president of the Development Company and board of directors member of the glass company, was not shared by the unionized employees working on the construction. On December 12, 1944, workers affiliated with the Union of Construction Workers and the Union of Manufacturers of Steel and General Mechanics, both members of the General Confederation of Workers, went on strike because of "a conflict between the two labor organizations." The strike ended the following month.

However, in February, 1945, there was another strike.

While the negotiations were prolonged and the tension rose,

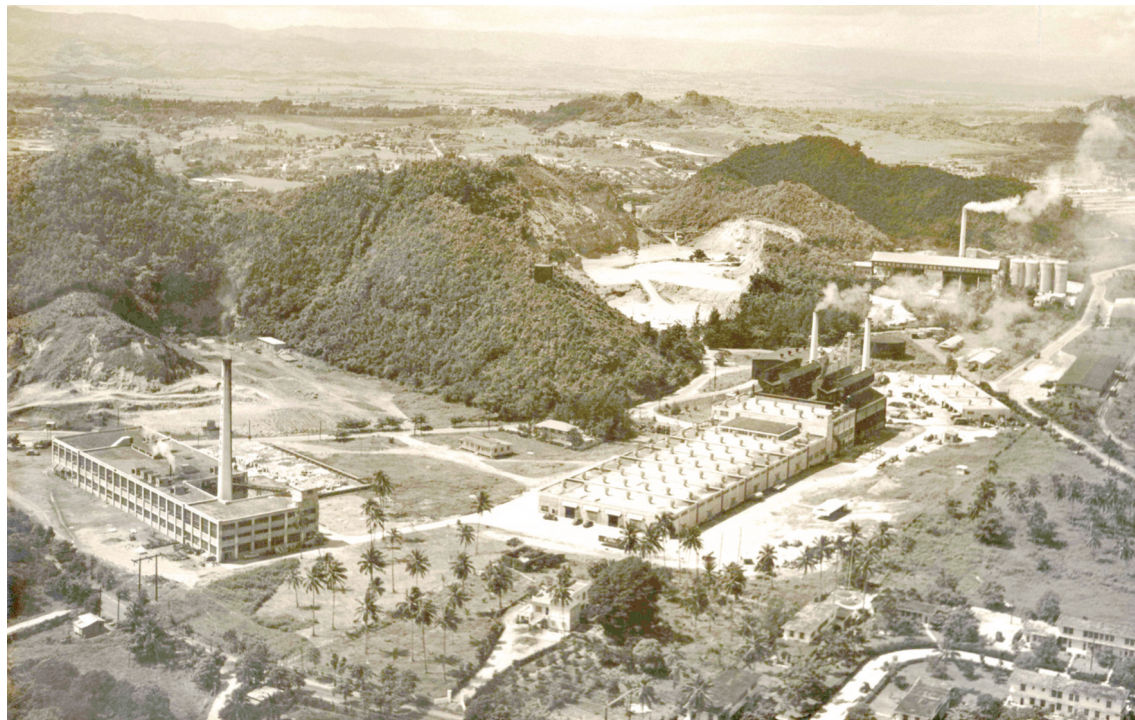


José L. Bolívar
 Commentary

experts from Texas arrived at Isla Grande Airport and were taken to live at the Hotel Normandie in order to operate the factory while the workers were on strike. This news spread rapidly through the island. As a result, the workers let the molten glass cool and harden in the ovens, causing the plant to shut down.

During the negotiations of the collective agreement the union leaders reminded Moscoso that he had delivered a speech in Ponce during the 1940 political campaign, in which he said that any industrial company in Puerto Rico which did not want to or could not pay at least \$1 per hour to its employees did not deserve to survive. Moscoso explained that he had said that in the intense heat of the campaign, and that it was not possible for the glass company to pay these wages and survive. This argument did not convince the labor leaders.

As if these problems were not enough, the Puerto Rican Cement union was requesting they be allowed to incorporate with the workers of the glass factory,



Courtesy/José L. Bolívar

An aerial view of the paper, glass and cement factories in Puerto Rico, circa 1940.

thereby forming "one big union." Moscoso did not accede to this request, preferring to have a separate union for each state-owned enterprise, as each had variations in their working conditions. In May 1945, the strike was settled. It took about six weeks to get the 20 tons of solidified glass out of the ovens to commence factory operations.

As a result of this strike, rum distillers — who had placed orders with this company for 65,000 cases of glass bottles — canceled their orders and bought them from U.S. suppliers. The glass company missed the boom in

rum sales that resulted from the liquor scarcity caused by World War II. Ironically, this was one of the main reasons why the state invested in this venture.

Moreover, difficulties in obtaining the proper equipment during the war proved that the types and sizes of bottles required by the local market were too numerous to produce efficiently. All this would be detrimental to the infant company, which could finally start its operations on June 25, 1945, a month after the war ended in Europe.

The factory was sold to Ferré Enterprises in 1950, and shortly

thereafter was closed. Would things have turned out differently if, instead of this confrontational approach, the unions would have acted as partners of this factory? This is something today's leaders should consider, as confrontational approaches rarely work.

José L. Bolívar holds a doctorate in history and is completing a book on the economic impact of World War II on Puerto Rico, which is scheduled to be published this year by the University of Puerto Rico Press. He may be reached at jbolivarpr@prtc.net.

VOICES

Antidemocracy and tax evasion

To Tom Lewis:

Your praise of the Senate for trimming the two chambers is a bit off, considering 80 percent of us voted for ONE CHAMBER. The will of the people, the referendum ballots we marked, the dollar bills of taxpayer millions, were all used by the politicians the way you and I use toilet paper.

And if you think they're going to do away with the per diem, without outrageously raising their salaries even more to offset the income tax they'll now be paying, you're living in fool's paradise.

And a per diem is payable when your employer has you traveling: hotels, restaurants, winter apparel and so forth — extraordinary expenses — that's why it's tax exempt. Even the most generous of bosses on earth won't grant you more than a few months of that. Certainly not for a four-year stint. If you live too far from your place of work, then YOU MOVE.

Paul Théron
 from Condado on Nov. 10

Pledge of Allegiance

To the Editor:

I am glad that our happy legislators find time to have fun while they work, or is it having fun while they play?

In any event, Mr. Rivera Schatz introduced a bill in English on Thursday in the Senate session. Appropriately titled for that legislative body, "The Pest Control Compact Act of 2009" the bill was in English. PDP Sen. García Padilla, having a bit of fun and while being honest, asked that the bill be translated into Spanish so that the NPP legislators (statehood advocates) know what they were about to vote for, since the majority do not speak English. The ever not-so-funny, like her father, Sen. Melinda Romero Barceló quickly retorted, in Spanish, that the bill had to be written in English. She had forgotten how to play the game, or she also does not know English.

All in all, a very fun day for our high-priced legislators. Sen. García Padilla need not worry about his NPP colleagues not understanding because the bill was in English. They never understand bills when they are in Spanish, as they vote only as instructed to by Mr. Rivera Schatz. I am requesting that each Senate session open up with the leg-

islators standing up and reciting the "Pledge of Allegiance." Now, that would be fun to watch.

J. D. Aragon
 from Old San Juan on Nov. 6

What when fighting for your government is wrong?

To U.S. Attorney Miguel Pereira:

On WOSO Radio Speak Out, you referred to those Americans who refused to fight in the Vietnam War saying, "Constitutional liberties" must be defended by "better men" than draft resisters.

May such "better men" be proud they murdered two million Vietnamese, or might those who kept their hands unbloodstained by right be the ones entitled to dignity? The judgement of history has discredited that war on the dominoes. The heroes were those who stood up against such wanton slaughter, against Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. Even Robert McNamara, the architect of the war, in his book acknowledges the conflict was

Another one bites the dust

These past two weeks have been sad ones for Puerto Rico as thousands of public and private sector workers have lost their jobs.

I have gone through the experience of losing a job more than once. However, I have also learned that there are always people willing to help you out in times of need. Recently, I learned that the local Associated Press bureau was closing its local wire service at the end of the month, leaving seven journalists jobless.

Associated Press officials said the local wire service was no longer profitable because it was serving only a few newspapers, radio and television stations. I strongly disagree. This is a serious blow to the local coverage of news as most media outlets depend on the service. Oftentimes, we supplement our news with material

provided by the Associated Press. But my biggest concern is that this decision will also reduce Puerto Rico's presence at the international level.

Crimes, drugs and the children's videotape

This past week, there was a huge uproar after a group of minors from a public housing project in Ponce made a realistic video in which they re-enacted the everyday life of drug gang members.

The video stirred a public outcry because the children re-enacted violent incidents, including a shooting death, using guns that appeared to be real.

Immediately, I heard Family Secretary Yanitsia Rivera say that the parents of these children could face criminal charges and that these children could even be removed from their homes. GIVE ME A BREAK!

Why is everyone so surprised by



their behavior? I read that there are 10 drug trafficking points in the public housing project where they live so these children are probably exposed to violence and criminal acts on a daily basis.

Children imitate the behavior they see around them and they did this video more than a year ago because that is what they know. So, why should the parents of these children, who are probably having a tough time making ends

meet, be criminalized? Why should these children be penalized?

If anything, they deserve an award for raising public awareness about the everyday life of children living in public housing projects. These children and their parents do not need to be sent to prison. If anything, they need to be educated and given the tools to break the cycle of violence.

Evaluate legalization of marijuana

After giving it much consideration, I believe it is time for the Legislature to evaluate — and I repeat: just evaluate — the possibility of legalizing marijuana in Puerto Rico, even if just for medical use.

There have been close to 800 murders in Puerto Rico so far this year, most of them related to drug use. It is obvious, to me at least, that we have lost the war on drugs.

Some people say cannabis is dangerous. The research that I have read is not conclusive. I have to say that David Nutt, chairman of Great Britain's advisory committee on drugs, has publicly said that cannabis is much safer than alcohol and tobacco. Research has shown that marijuana has improved the lives of people suffering from glaucoma and those needing treatment for nausea.

I don't know if it would help reduce crime because drug dealers will continue to sell other drugs, but it could probably give police officers more time to fight the harder drugs. But I do believe it will probably help increase government revenues because the people who sell this drug, will end up paying income taxes.

Eva Llorens Vélez has been a reporter and writer for close to 25 years and covers the Legislature for the Daily Sun.

VOICES

outright American aggression. Olaf Palme of Sweden, to Nixon's distress, likened the United States to Nazi Germany.

American GIs, 59,000 of them, perished. Not as valiant defenders of democracy, but as expendable pawns of capricious Washington politicians. The Saigon government was a puppet, corrupt, nonparticipatory undemocracy, whose rascals scampered onto that rooftop chopper, in that ingnomious finale, etched in our memories. Read "The Vietnam War" by Stanley Karnow, the definitive work. And see "Hearts and Minds," awarded the 1975 Oscar for Best Documentary Film.

And Vietnam was gallant. They could've easily opened a campaign of terror on the United States homeland, the World Trade Center was brand-spanking new then. The Tet offensive was fought to bring the genocidal reality of the war into the living rooms of complacent American families, fully knowing ten of their soldiers would pay with their lives for every one enemy downed, such was the U.S. technological edge. But it worked, it was the beginning of the humbling of an arrogant superpower by dint of almost superhuman courage and sacrifice of a small and ancient nation struggling one more time for their independence.

I'm indignant that you, a learned U.S. Attorney, should be holding on to such an unthinking right-winger mentality. Not to mention that you didn't answer the caller's constitutional inquiry.

*Nina Fotze
from San Juan on Nov. 8*

Social democracy

In REF: "P.R.: Capitalist paradise or Socialist hotbed?" by Robert Friedman, Daily Sun Washington Bureau. Nov. 9.

Just a quick comment. "The island [of Puerto Rico] ... on the verge of turning into either a capitalist's paradise or a worker's revolutionary state ... etc."

It seems, in my opinion, that we in Puerto Rico are still struggling between the extremes of what may be considered the capitalist's "fiasco" and the failed marxist-socialist analysis of things (both of which have, in many ways, and in the opinion of many, all the elements of a fundamentalist religion).

I think we need to seriously consider that what is known as "Social Democracy" is probably a better alternative than the extremes of capitalism and marxist-socialism. Two quick readings can be, "Understanding Social Democracy" by Sheri Berman, Associate Professor of Political Science at Barnard College-Columbia University, or "The Unlikely Marriage Between Ideological Democracy and Brutal Capitalism", by Robert Wolff, a contemporary political philosopher.

Or if we want to stay local, we can always browse through the political and economic propositions of the Puerto Rican Independence Party, P.I.P, the only political party in Puerto Rico to support a social democratic vision.

I am by no means an expert, would have to do Harvard or Yale for that, but my citizen's opinion is that for the little that I know about these things, social democrats and social democracy, seem to include within their political and economic propositions several very important elements of free, democratic and progressive societies: respect for human rights as they are understood in the contemporary world, civil freedoms in all respects, entrepreneurship and free enterprise with strong and precise measures of social justice and social empathy, and a strong social safety net that covers each and everyone of the problems that capitalism fails to address and that marxist-socialism fails to fix. Social democracy also seems to be a political-economic concept based on "pragmatism" rather than "belief" or "ideology".

If the P.I.P. hasn't been able to present itself as a real alternative for real, positive change here in Puerto Rico for whichever reasons that has been, I hope that everybody on this island who is truly interested in improving our way of life and bettering our future will give a chance to learning whatever it's needed to think of a future out of the framework of the failed extremes of capitalism and marxist-socialism.

I also think that what we are seeing in the United States — in the mainstream discussions, no longer in the fringe — with the right-on-target concerns that Americans like filmmaker Michael Moore of "Capitalism, A Love Story", former presidential candidate Ralph Nader and Ohio Congressman, Dennis Kucinich, maybe even Ar-

inna Huffington, just to name a few, is probably going to eventually lead, in my opinion, to the same solution: Social Democracy.

Thank you for publishing this short note. If there are any experts who'd like to give more in-depth, academic and/or historical analyses on this topic, many of us readers of newspapers in Puerto Rico will benefit from it. Many of us are always open to learn new ideas about things and always open to read different views and perspectives of matters that affect us all.

*Eric O. Jackson
from Carolina on Nov. 10.*

On the Northeastern Corridor

To the Editor,

This letter is about the island in general and about the Northeastern Ecological Corridor in particular. There are 16,000 housing units just completed or under construction for which there is no market. This number does not include the vacant properties either abandoned or for sale. In the Fajardo, Luquillo and Río Grande area we already have two luxury hotels within a half-hour's car ride from each other. Three hotels if you include Meliá, another hotel which stands vacant and is deteriorating. Does it make sense to add more of the same to this region — destroying our precious and scarce virgin land?

It is obvious that we are in an absolute-power situation, at least for three more years, which makes a land grab of historic proportions possible and also probable. We desperately need the Corridor for the following reasons:

Firstly, for sustainable economic development benefiting most of the people in this area, including recreational activities. Secondly, for the preservation of El Yunque, which cannot stand alone if there is a fragmented ecosystem. Thirdly, the Corridor's wetland forms a natural flood barrier during hurricanes and in case of a tsunami. Fourthly, the poor Tinglar (Leatherback turtle) will have to fend for itself. Such is life!

*Ms. Aino Pérez
from Fajardo on Nov. 11*