

“The economic situation was already pretty difficult before the government’s most recent measures,” Iván Vargas, a worker at Puerto Rico’s Water and Sewage Authority, said in a phone interview from Mayagüez, Puerto Rico, Feb. 13.

Vargas was one of thousands of workers who marched in San Juan Feb. 9 to protest the government’s antilabor moves outside the annual meeting of the Association of Industrialists of Puerto Rico, which was attended by representatives of the island’s colonial government and Washington’s Financial Oversight and Management Board for Puerto Rico.

“Many of my co-workers are temporary workers. Some of them are only getting the federal minimum wage of $7.25 an hour and minimum benefits,” Vargas said. “Little by little, they are quitting and heading to the United States.”

One of the largest contingents at the march was from the Authentic Independent Union at the water authority. More than two dozen unions joined the action.

Since taking office in January, Gov. Ricardo Rosselló has pushed through laws and executive orders to meet the demands of the bipartisan Financial Oversight Board, appointed by then President Barack Obama to ensure payment to wealthy bondholders of some $70 billion owed by the U.S. colony’s government agencies.

Under the Labor Transformation and Flexibilization Law adopted in January, employers are allowed to increase the probation period for new workers from90 days to either nine or 12 months. The law cuts the Christmas bonus by 50 percent for those with less than one year seniority, raises the minimum number of hours needed to qualify for vacations and sick pay from

115 to 130 hours a month, and allows bosses to force employees to work on Sundays without paying overtime.

To sweeten the attack on labor, the law increases paternity leave from five to 15 days for some workers. Rosselló claims the law will save the government $100 million a year. Rosselló also signed a law to allow the government to privatize additional public services, and instructed all government agencies to cut expenses by 10 percent.

This is on top of measures by previous governments that laid off thousands of workers, cut pensions and increased taxes on working people.

“The labor reform is disastrous for working people,” said José Rodríguez Vélez, president of the Union Solidarity Movement (MSS), by phone from San Juan. The MSS organizes workers at the Coca Cola and Pepsi bottling plants and at La India brewery. “What the government is trying to do is create divisions in the working class.”

“Before the new law, workers received time and a half after eight hours in a day, now they don’t get it until they’ve worked 40 hours a week,” Pedro Irene Maymí, president of the Authentic Independent Union, told the Militant from San Juan. One measure states that all government agencies are under “one sole employer.” This means “they can move workers from one agency to another Workers will lose their seniority rights,” Maymí said.

“The government claims the law will create more jobs,” he added. “That’s just a pretext to eliminate the benefits and protections that workers have.”

Junta threatens to use ‘many tools’

The fiscal board, also called the junta, has been pushing Rosselló to make deeper cuts. In a Feb. 2 letter, Financial Oversight Board Chair José Carrión warned the governor that the junta has “many tools it can deploy” if it doesn’t get what it wants. Among its powers: criminal charges against anyone who doesn’t cooperate.

One of the junta’s demands is a 10 percent cut in pensions to save $200 million. Pensions on the island average $1,100 a month, but more than 38,000 retired government workers only get $500.

The Puerto Rican economy has contracted 18 percent since a recession began in 2006. The latest figures show an even further decline over the last year, including an 8.9 percent drop in workers employed in manufacturing, a 13.6 percent drop in cement sales, and a 3.1 percent drop in the number of hours worked.

More protests are planned. Students at the University of Puerto Rico are holding assemblies on campuses across the island to organize against proposed cuts in the university budget and steep increases in tuition. Unions are organizing protests for March 8, International Women’s Day, and for May Day.

Many workers are buoyed by the return of independence fighter Oscar López Rivera to Puerto Rico, although he remains under house arrest. López will make his first public appearance on May 17 when his commuted sentence ends.

“I heard about his return during the demonstration,” water worker Vargas said. “I’ve read a lot about him. He was imprisoned for his beliefs. But not all my co-workers agree.”

“I tell them what I think. And that he is being freed because of pressure not just here but internationally. There’s no going back.”

Photo: Members of more than two dozen unions rally in San Juan Feb. 9 to protest demands by U.S. fiscal board for deeper attacks on workers and colonial government’s anti-labor moves. Movimiento Independentista Nacional Hostosiano/Luis López.