

The Puerto Rican People Fight Back

Escrito por Digna Sánchez / MINH
Jueves, 29 de Junio de 2017 12:18 -



Presentation made on behalf of the Coordination Group Against the Junta of Fiscal Control (Concertación en Contra de la Junta de Control Fiscal) at Left Forum 2017, by Digna Sánchez, Coordinator, DiaspoRicans DiaspoRiqueños, member group of Concertación.

Left Forum 2017
The Resistance
John Jay College of Criminal Justice, NYC
June 4, 2017

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Puerto Rico is once again very much in the news. To fully understand the current hullabaloo, you need to start at its beginning, which is the invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898 by the United States, at the end of the so called Spanish American War. Interestingly at that time the US declared odious the debt which Puerto Rico had with Spain and said they would not pay it. They then proceeded to declare the assets and currency in Puerto Rico at half their value as transferred to dollars. Thus, with this decree they impoverished large sectors of the people, citizens of Spain's recently declared autonomous region of Puerto Rico.

It was with violence at many levels that the colonization by the United States began as Puerto Rico became a possession of the US. Subsequently in the 119 years that have now transpired

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since the invasion, the economy of Puerto Rico has been under the control of US laws. During the 20th century Puerto Rico's economy has been used at the whim of the US capitalist interests, as it was first transformed from a diversified agricultural economy into a monocultural sugar cane economy. This led to the destruction of agriculture as the base of the economy and the capacity of Puerto Rico to feed itself and has resulted in the present economy which now must import over 80% of what it consumes. Later it became a clothing manufacturing center for US goods. Pieces of garments, especially underwear garments, were produced in Puerto Rico and then shipped to the US for final construction of the garments. Subsequently, the fully constructed garment was returned to the Island for purchase by Puerto Ricans at an increased price of course. There was the period of the failed petrol-chemical industry which left large sections of the island contaminated and resembling ghost towns once the plants moved on. Subsequently, the pharmaceuticals moved in so that today it is a major producer of US pharmaceuticals. Throughout these economic maneuvers the people of Puerto Rico were basically a way station for the generation of mega profits which were transferred out of Puerto Rico while these corporations paid little or no taxes which could be used to benefit the people of Puerto Rico.

When in 1920 the Merchant Marine Act, also known by its short title of the Jones Act was enacted another colonial impediment to the development of Puerto Rico's economy was set in place and continues to this day. With Puerto Rico prohibited from using any other than the US shipping fleet, which is the most expensive in the world, prices for the goods brought into Puerto Rico are thus sold at an increased price. With almost 90% of all needed goods imported especially food Puerto Rico faces an extreme level of food insecurity. How ironic for an island with rich fertile soil, but let's not forget that the agriculture was destroyed. Here to the people of Puerto Rico are starting to reclaim their agriculture with a renewed understanding of the importance of our local agriculture.

Already in the 1960's the current crisis was envisioned and denounced by progressive sectors, especially the Independence sector. No credence was given by the electoral parties of the PPD or PNP. The PPD – Popular Democratic Party is the party of the Commonwealth of PR which in 1953 was presented to the United Nations as a manifestation of the decolonizing of Puerto Rico, which was not the truth. The literal translation of El Estado Libre Asociado is Associated Free State, which is a total fabrication because Puerto Rico is neither Associated to the US, nor is it a state of the US nor is it Free and sovereign. The PNP or New Progressive Party, is the pro-statehood party which has nothing progressive about it, other than the use of the word in their name. By 2006 following the demise of section 936 of the US Internal Revenue Code which gave US corporations lucrative tax incentives for operating in Puerto Rico. This led to the closing of plants and the removal of capital from Puerto Rico's banks, Puerto Rico entered a deep recession two years before the US economic bubble burst with repercussions worldwide.

By 2015 the then governor of Puerto Rico Alejandro Garcia Padilla stated that Puerto Rico could not repay its debt, now at \$72 billion-dollars. Nothing was said of how the debt was allowed to get to the point it was. The debt accrued over many years of colonial exploitation, as well as political corruption and pilfering with the collusion of Puerto Rico's governments. Initially the people of Puerto Rico saw the debt as a problem of the local political parties and corruption. Thus, at the beginning many were looking to the US to fix the situation.

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The scrambling for a response from the US was put in motion and the result was PROMESA – Puerto Rico Oversight Management and Economic Stability Act. The acronym of PROMESA is a cruel and misinforming attempt to hide the truth behind the Fiscal Control Board taking control over Puerto Rico. The word Promesa (promise in English) has a cultural and religious connotation (don't forget Puerto Rico is a predominantly Catholic country) and a Promesa is seen as a commitment to remedy a wrong. While at first, close to 80% of the people supported Promesa and the Junta, as it has gotten clarified that the Promise is to provide for the creditors with total disregard to the needs of the people of Puerto Rico, public sentiment has started to turn against the Junta. Further, the dismissal of the Audit Commission and not requiring that the debt be audited has further angered many.

PROMESA was signed by President Obama and enacted into Law on June 30, 2016. That very day, the Supreme Court rendered its decision in the Sanchez Valle case regarding double jeopardy as relates to the autonomy of Puerto Rico to prosecute cases in Puerto Rico which have already been tried and resolved in Federal Court. In addition, the Attorney General declared that Puerto Rico had no authority or sovereignty to re-structure its debt because Puerto Rico was under the plenary power of the US Congress and the Territorial Clause of the Constitution Article 4 Section 3. Puerto Rico belongs to but is not part of the US, and the Congress holds sovereign power over Puerto Rico.

PROMESA thus reaffirms the colonial status of Puerto Rico.

Even before it was finally enacted on June 30, 2016 the people of Puerto Rico were organizing to fight it.

The fight took on diverse forms from diverse sectors. Congress was lobbied by some to not approve PROMESA, calls were made, letters sent and petitions signed by the thousands.

On May 25, 2016 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Santurce, several hundred individuals and groups came together representing diverse sectors and formed the Concertación Puertorriqueña Contra la Junta de Control Fiscal, (in English – Puerto Rico Coordination Group Against the US Fiscal Control Board), known in the vernacular in Puerto Rico, as La Concertación. Composed of close to 100 civic organizations, cooperatives, labor unions, business groups, academics, students, environmentalists, religious groups, community based organizations, Human and Civil Rights defenders, Health groups, women's groups, LGBTQ groups, and groups representing the Diaspora, such as the group which I represent, the DiaspoRicans DiaspoRiqueños.

This broad coming together of groups has been one of the most hopeful developments during this period of uncertainty for the people of Puerto Rico.

Its first action was held five days before PROMESA was enacted. Nearly five thousand people convened at the Coliseo Roberto Clemente in San Juan on June 25, 2016. That day, the Concertación's "Declaración del Pueblo en Contra de PROMESA" was approved by those assembled. Five days later a massive picket was held in front of the Federal Building in Hato Rey, just as President Obama was signing PROMESA into law.

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Since its inception, the Concertación developed an intense program of educating people about PROMESA. At the beginning 80% of the people supported PROMESA. This reflects the generalized discontent with the corruption in government, which many attributed as the main cause of the crisis. You must also factor in the misinformation continuously spread by those in control and in support of continued US domination and the insidious and century long implantation of a colonial mentality ingrained in many.

Presentations were made to groups throughout Puerto Rico and educational materials were developed. I brought some copies of 2 such fliers. One was developed by a member group APPU (labor group which represents the University Professors at the UPR) and is in Spanish, and the other an English flier developed by the Concertación for use especially in the Puerto Rican Diaspora and among friends in the US. The Concertación has key representation of the religious sector and one of the 5 spokespersons is a former Methodist Bishop, Rev. Juan Vera. As such the Concertación has supported the vigils called by the religious sector to denounce PROMESA. This is a very important sector given the level of religious participation in Puerto Rico.

The conflicts of interest in the members named to conform the Junta has become a critical piece in educating the people. While many thought that the Junta would address and resolve corruption, the information which has surfaced and made public by the Hedge Clippers which Julio López will address in greater detail, has unmasked the inherent corruption within the Junta. Some of the members were the very individuals responsible for the debt creation. This has further angered the people as the information has been publicized.

The support for the Audit of the debt is one of the key demands of the Concertación. The Frente Ciudadano por la Auditoria de la Deuda (Citizens United for the Debt's Audit) leads this effort. Interestingly neither the Junta or the governor and his government support an Audit. In effect the governor dismantled the Audit Commission. This is an issue which has increased the anger of many people in Puerto Rico and heightened the distrust of the Junta.

With the information regarding the complicity of Junta members in the very evolution of the debt their credibility has been shaken.

There are of course other groups of varying sizes which oppose the Junta and carry out their work from their own political perspective outside of the Concertación.

From its founding the Concertación declared that it would demonstrate peacefully and would participate in civil disobedience. To that end people were asked to sign up for their participation in acts of civil disobedience and were trained in how to participate in an act of civil disobedience.

The Concertación called for a demonstration jointly with other organizations in August 2016 in front of the Hotel Condado Plaza to denounce a meeting taking place there of a group of business representatives and supporters of the Junta and PROMESA. This demonstration ended with a confrontation between the police and demonstrators when the police tried to force the demonstrators to disperse.

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Later on, the 18th of November 2016 the Concertación convened a major demonstration to protest the first meeting in Puerto Rico of the Junta which was held at El Conquistador Hotel in Fajardo, Puerto Rico.

This past 13th of March 2017 a picket in front of Santander Bank in Hato Rey was held to coincide with the Junta's meeting in New York. In addition, the role of Santander Bank in the current fiscal crisis and their creation of illegal debt was highlighted. The information decimated via the Hedge Clippers has been an invaluable source of information which helps to educate regarding the corruption underlying the Junta. Julio will speak more about this.

The Concertación also supported the Campamento en Contra de la Junta formed by mostly young people and was set up across the street from the Federal Building. They were a part of the Concertación and carried on for many months with their programs held at the Campamento to educate about PROMESA. They developed a flier in Spanish and in English which has been widely circulated entitled Promesa for Dummies, and I am circulating some copies here.

The Encampment has closed, but the current student strike at the University of Puerto Rico is a critical part of the struggle against the Junta. The students have maintained that they do not accept the Junta's proposed cuts of \$450 million to the UPR. In effect this would decimate the UPR. The professors and non-teaching personnel of the UPR support the students. The students declared a temporary strike on the 28th of March. This became a strike without a set end date as voted at the National Assembly held at the Roberto Clemente Coliseum on April 5th. The students have moved forward their strike within a broad democratic process which engaged the vast majority of students in decision making. Assemblies are held at the eleven individual campuses and a National Assembly with thousands of students participating. The diverse marches and actions which the students have held are to demonstrate their repudiation of PROMESA and the Junta. A key demand of the students, as well as the Concertación is the need for the debt to be audited.

The important role of the Concertación as a unifying force was demonstrated this past May 1st. With the active participation of the Concertación a call was made for a united May Day against the Junta and PROMESA. This became the rallying call for the march for May 1st, International Workers Day. Several feeder marches including one from the UPR which we the DiaspoRicans participated in all converged to the financial district in Hato Rey to where the office of the Junta is located. In all it is estimated that over 60,000 marched that day. After the march was over, several incidents occurred and some windows were broken. This has been jumped upon by the government of Ricky Rosselló to label demonstrators as vandals and even likened them to terrorists etc. It has been used by the government to seek to stop the support which those fighting the Junta have received. In fact, a law has been enacted which calls for severe measures against demonstrators who cover their faces in demonstrations.

The people of Puerto Rico have fought other major battles and achieved success when unity of all sectors was reached. Such was the struggle to get the Navy out of Vieques. Recently that unity of the people of Puerto Rico and the International support was able to secure the release of Oscar López Rivera, who was imprisoned for almost 36 years for his efforts to free Puerto Rico. He never killed anyone and yet he was held for longer than the 27 years Nelson Mandela

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was held by the government of apartheid South Africa.

As the people of Puerto Rico have become more knowledgeable about the provisions of the law PROMESA they have become more active in combatting it.

Many who thought that the Junta would help eradicate corruption were dismayed to learn that section 104(e) allows the Junta to accept gifts and donations a clear enticement to corruption.

The labor movement has rallied against PROMESA sanctifying bosses to pay new employees of 25 years of age or less a minimum wage of \$4.25 per hora. Already there have been dismissals of older workers making way for the proposed \$4.25 per hour minimum. The labor movement is being targeted and there are efforts to roll back a long time right to have union dues deducted via direct write off from the worker's salary. This of course is viewed as a way of under cutting the power of organized labor which has steadfastly opposed PROMESA.

Another major concern looms regarding the natural resources of Puerto Rico and publicly owned entities which may be sold and /or privatized.

The expenses accrued by the Junta will be paid by the people of Puerto Rico; adding injury to insult! The price tag for the first two years is calculated at \$350 million. Recently the hiring of an Executive Director who will be paid \$625,000 has enraged many Puerto Ricans who face impoverishment once the Junta's draconian plan is put into effect this coming fiscal year.

Further the members of the Junta, some of whom were key players in the development of this illegal debt have immunity and cannot be litigated against for decisions made while a part of the Junta. You will hear more about this from Julio.

Additionally, government employee pensioners in Puerto Rico who do not receive anywhere near lucrative pensions will see significant reductions in their pensions. All of this so as to pay the creditors.

With the recent move to a process of bankruptcy as part of PROMESA it remains to be seen what will happen.

One of the immediate results of this crisis has been the depopulating of Puerto Rico. So many Puerto Ricans have left for the US that today there are more Puerto Ricans in the US than Puerto Rico. Over 5 million in the US and a little over 3 million in Puerto Rico. I know Jose Velasquez will speak to the role the Diaspora plays in combatting PROMESA.

Life in Puerto Rico today is highly stressful, but there is a sense of urgency. More and more people understand that at the core of the current crisis is the colonial status of Puerto Rico. A key component of Puerto Rico becoming a country which can provide a good life for its people is the need to decolonize Puerto Rico and thus have the sovereignty to plan by and for the people of Puerto Rico.

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In that effort, we look to the support of the Puerto Rican Diaspora and of progressives in the United States.

¡Gracias!