6

Puerto Ricans, Politics, and Labor Activism

EDDIE GONZALEZ AND LOIS GRAY

Puerto Rican electoral activism in urban America is a relatively recent development. When we contrast electoral activism with labor activism, we find that Puerto Rican participation in the labor movement generally has been more intensive and consistent. From the early 1900s until the 1960s, politically sensitive or conscientious Puerto Ricans tended to be attracted to labor activism rather than electoral activism.

Although Puerto Rican membership in the established political parties has been spotty and inconsistent, it has strong historical roots in powerful unions such as the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and the National Maritime Union Locals. Since American labor unions have been organizing in Puerto Rico since the early 1900s, generally it has been easier to register union membership than it has been to register party affiliation or to register potential voters in the Puerto Rican community. In a study reported in the 1940s, Charles Zimmerman, a former secretary-general of ILGWU local 22, pointed out that it was also easier to organize Puerto Ricans than it was to organize Jews and Italians.[1] (This seems to be a reversal of what we have seen in the electoral arena.) A recent translated work by long-time activist Bernardo Vega is rich in details about Puerto Rican labor activism in the United States from the turn of the twentieth century into its first couple of decades.[2] He reports that in 1899, La Resistencia, a powerful Puerto Rican caucus within the International Cigarworkers Union of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), was formed; by 1918 Vega claims that 4,500 Puerto Ricans (a sizable portion of the Puerto Rican community

in the United States at that time) were members of various cigar maker unions. A study conducted by Columbia University after World War II found that 51 percent of all adult Puerto Ricans in 1948 were members of labor unions; in 1959 another study discovered that two-thirds of all Spanish-speaking households in New York City included at least one person who was a member of a labor union.[3] Today Puerto Ricans probably account for more than 15 percent of total labor union membership in New York City; in some organizations their percentage is as much as one-half.[4]

A number of factors explain Puerto Rican openness to labor activism. First, the Puerto Rican community is primarily a working-class one. It is an ethnic group that has provided important cheap-labor services to the U.S. economy. Most jobs held by Puerto Ricans are in hotels, restaurants, laundry, and building services. In 1970 57.7 percent of all Puerto Ricans were classified by the U.S. Bureau of the Census as laborers, operators, or "service workers."[5] As a preponderant working-class community, Puerto Ricans may have a greater receptivity to labor activism than do other ethnic groups who have been able to enter white-collar occupations at a faster rate.

A second reason explaining the receptivity to labor activism is the strong sense of labor activism that earlier Puerto Rican migrants brought to the United States. Indeed until World War II many of the migration waves could be characterized by significant Puerto Rican workers from various industrial sectors on the island. In the early 1900s many migrants settling on the Lower East Side were actually *tabaqueros* and *cigarreros*, tobacco and cigar workers who had been unionized in Puerto Rico. In the 1920s a significant number of maritime workers were Puerto Ricans who settled in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. By the 1930s, when East Harlem had become the major Puerto Rican settlement in the United States, many residents were textile and garment workers. Due to the effects of Operation Bootstrap in the 1940s and 1950s, migration entered into a new phase of massive dislocation from Puerto Rico. For the most part the post–World War II migrants were former agricultural workers, not highly educated, without skills, and unemployed. At least for the first four decades of Puerto Rican migration to the United States then, the migrants came from social backgrounds that made them more receptive to labor activism than to electoral activism in the United States.

Another reason why Puerto Ricans have been open to labor activism is that the labor arena provided a conceptual and programmatic linkage

between Puerto Ricans in the United States and in Puerto Rico. Labor activism in the United States, especially before World War II, was viewed by some as an extension of labor activism in Puerto Rico. Organized labor made little differentiation between Puerto Rican workers in both locales. For example, in 1901 the AFL named Santiago Iglesias Pantin as the labor organizer for Puerto Rico and Cuba. In this capacity, Iglesias made frequent trips to New York City in attempts to organize Puerto Rican workers there. In another reflection of linkage, we see numerous instances of Puerto Ricans in the United States becoming involved in the labor struggles of workers in Puerto Rico. Vega reports that in 1916, for example, a couple of hundred Puerto Rican cigar makers in New York City held a rally in support of a cigar strike in Puerto Rico.[6] Recently, the Puerto Rican Socialist party has attempted to make workers in the United States more aware of labor struggles on the island, primarily through its publication, *La Claridad*.

Since the 1960s labor activism in Puerto Rico and among Puerto Ricans in the United States seems to have become somewhat disjointed. Puerto Rican labor activists in both locales are concentrating on their respective environment; workers in the United States are grappling with issues that are only indirectly related to issues facing workers on the island. Two examples are racial discrimination and the status of Puerto Rico. In the United States, Puerto Ricans have had to respond to racial discrimination to an extent perhaps not necessary in Puerto Rico. But workers in Puerto Rico have had to be more concerned with the status issue than fellow compatriots involved with labor struggles in the United States.

From the viewpoint of organized labor, any distinctive ethnic group presents a challenge to the organization in terms of its ability to enlist their support and integrate them into the existing structure. This challenge is intensified by the extent of cultural and language differences between new arrivals and traditional membership. For a long time, labor unions in New York City have received and absorbed successive waves of immigrants from a wide variety of backgrounds, including unskilled agricultural workers, skilled artisans, and professionals and distinctive cultural traditions.

Since World War II, unlike the first couple of decades of the twentieth century, most Puerto Ricans migrating to New York have had little experience in organizations of any kind and few previous contacts with unions. Nonetheless in industries where they are employed on the main-

land, they look increasingly to the union, the only organization with which they have daily contact, not only as a machinery for solving their problems on the job but as an intermediary with other agencies in the community. These expectations have not always been fulfilled. While many newcomers from Puerto Rico have been met with sympathy and understanding by old-timers imbued with the fraternal spirit of unionism and/or cognizant of their problems as a result of their own migrant backgrounds, engrained organizational habits and bureaucratic practices of some unions have inspired open criticism in the Spanish press, picket lines of protesting Puerto Rican members, and charges before public agencies.

Despite a tradition of labor activism, the relationship between Puerto Ricans and organized labor today is complex. One could have a pessimistic assessment or an optimistic one when studying Puerto Ricans and established unions. Substantiating the pessimistic view are three generalizations:

1. Most of the powerful unions have excluded Puerto Rican members from important decision-making processes.
2. Civil service unions have been used to prevent Puerto Ricans from realizing socioeconomic mobility.
3. Organized labor has reacted adversely to Puerto Rican political mobilization.

Clara Rodriguez has studied this question extensively. She reports:

> Formerly a vehicle of minority mobility, they now function to keep out minorities. Having battled the older entrenched ethnics for an occupational niche, the newer ethnics now use the union as a means of securing their positions. Although data on unions is very difficult to come by, it is fairly clear that with the exception of low-level jobs like garment workers and food services, most skilled or crafted unions are closed to Puerto Ricans.[7]

Luis Fuentes, one of the contributors to this study, also explains how the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) attempted to inhibit the growing electoral strength of Puerto Ricans in Community District 1.

Puerto Rican labor activists have complained bitterly to their union brothers about various issues; these include charges of corruption, low wages, discrimination in advancement, lack of ethnic representation at leadership levels, and an underutilization of Puerto Rican labor staff.

But while acknowledging these problems, some organizers feel that the labor arena could be advantageous to efforts aimed at politically mobilizing the Puerto Rican community.

A number of factors may substantiate this optimistic view. First, the well-established unions are concerned about the influence of "racket" unions, which weaken the thrust of organized labor. Unionized workers are also sensitive to competition from low-wage, nonunionized competitors. And established unions are also concerned about keeping up the tradition of worker fraternity. These factors are encouraging organized labor to consider more seriously than in the past the complaints of Puerto Ricans.

According to AFL-CIO and government officials, at least 30,000 Puerto Ricans are enrolled in racket unions. Existing with the connivance of employers who seek to avoid unionization by legitimate labor unions, racket union organizations sign contracts that provide for dues collection by the employer without the consent of the employees and wage scales at the legal minimum. They are known as paper unions because they hold no membership meetings and provide no services to members. Frequently an attorney serves as a go-between for arrangements between racketeers and employers, and the union operates out of his office. Typical legal cases involve workers who protest against these collusive arrangements and are fired and blacklisted among other employers in the same industry; union officials who collect fees on the promise of providing jobs and disappear with the money; Puerto Ricans who receive lower rates of pay than non-Puerto Ricans for the same work; and unions that force members to subscribe to fraudulent welfare plans. The threat of low-wage competition to union shops provides an incentive to regular unions to organize the unorganized Puerto Ricans and to raid the racket unions. From time to time, unions have been under pressure from outside organizations to which Puerto Ricans turned for advice and assistance. The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico Migration Office, the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists, and, more recently, neighborhood community action groups are among the organizations that have spoken on behalf of Puerto Rican workers. Not only have these groups registered complaints about the treatment accorded to individual Puerto Ricans, but their general interest and concern have contributed to the push for action. Black protest organizations have also added to the pressure for change.

The drive for union membership in Puerto Rico has also stimulated

the interest of mainland unions in their Puerto Rican members on the continent. As a result of capital migration to the island (the reverse of labor migration to the continent), residents of Puerto Rico are employed in plants of mainland-based companies. Given the desire to organize in Puerto Rico and recognizing the interchange between migrants and their friends on the island, recently unions have been encouraged to establish a good reputation with their Puerto Rican members in New York City. From time to time public opinion has played an important role. In the 1950s a barrage of unfavorable publicity about exploitation and racket unions spurred legitimate labor organizations to rebuild their public image through efforts to improve the conditions of minorities.

In the early 1950s rising concern with the plight of low-wage workers who were at the mercy of unscrupulous employers and unions led to formation of the Labor Advisory Committee on Puerto Rican Affairs in New York City. The committee had three objectives: to organize Puerto Ricans into legitimate unions; to encourage affiliated organizations to unionize their Puerto Rican members through programs and policies that would serve the needs of new members and build loyalty to the union; and to establish channels of communication between organized labor and the Puerto Rican population of New York City. To accomplish these objectives, the committee assisted member unions in organizing campaigns, provided interpreters and speakers for union meetings, translated literature into Spanish, and advised local unions regarding the establishment of educational programs and community services for Puerto Rican members. The executive secretary served as a counselor on the individual problems and complaints of Puerto Ricans. Board members intervened with the union officers, employing techniques of persuasion in attempts to resolve problems. At the outset, the aims of the committee had to be "sold" to officials who were suspicious and fearful. Subsequently the Committee to End Exploitation of Puerto Ricans and Other Minority Groups was formed as an official part of the New York Central Labor Council structure.

In 1970, the Hispanic Labor Committee, an organization of Spanish-speaking union officials, was officially recognized by the New York City Central Labor Council and asked to serve in an advisory capacity. Organization along ethnic lines is traditional in New York City unions. Italian, Irish, and Jewish clubs were formed by immigrants in earlier years and continue to function, carrying on recreational, cultural, educational, and political activities with an ethnic orientation. In recent

years, counterpart organizations have developed for blacks and Puerto Ricans. In Local 3, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), the idea of forming a Puerto Rican club grew out of a union-sponsored study tour of Puerto Rico organized by Cornell University that stimulated the Puerto Rican members' pride in their island heritage and enhanced their desire to achieve identity and recognition in New York City. Local 3's Santiago Iglesias Club emphasizes leadership training and community activity. The Spanish Committee of District 65, United Auto Workers (UAW), sponsors cultural programs designed to interpret Hispanic music, drama, and traditions to other members of the union. Whatever the emphasis, recreational, cultural, educational, or political, these organizations of Spanish-speaking members evolve their own leadership, plan their own activities, and serve as a channel of communication between Puerto Ricans and other members of the unions.

Currently the Hispanic Labor Committee is composed of approximately 150 Spanish trade union officers and officials of AFL-CIO, Teamsters, and UAW. The purpose of the committee is to ensure a better understanding among the Spanish-speaking labor union members. Membership is open to workers affiliated with a labor union. The committee serves as an official advisory body to the New York City Central Labor Council AFL-CIO. In the twenty years of its existence, the committee has grown in membership and has been involved in numerous activities on behalf of Puerto Rican and Spanish-speaking workers. Annual dinners sponsored by the committee recognize outstanding leaders and provide funding for a scholarship program, which awards tuition support to aspiring college students, both youngsters and working adults. In addition, the committee provides oversight to a job development and placement program funded by the city.

The labor arena is crucial for Puerto Ricans; it is a forum that will allow this group to use its numbers, growing size, and preponderance of working-class people advantageously. In many cases, unions have been either active or silent partners in exploiting the Puerto Rican community. But this is not the entire story. Puerto Ricans seeking power will fail if they look only to the electoral arena or to radical politics. Organized labor can provide an important forum and base for Puerto Rican political mobilization. Some union practices, including the seniority provisions that characterize the vast majority of collective bar-

gaining agreements and family recruitment which is the basis for apprenticeship selection in many building trades unions, militate against any newcomer. On the other hand, union contract clauses that prohibit discrimination protect such disadvantaged groups as Puerto Ricans. The National Maritime Union and District 65 are examples of unions that operate hiring halls and vigorously enforce a policy of nondiscrimination, making opportunities for better-paying jobs available on a seniority basis. This power has been used to introduce Puerto Ricans to shops where they have never been employed before, to open the way for movement to higher skill classifications, and even to break patterns of segregation where employers tended to hire only Puerto Ricans, thereby isolating the newcomer group from other union members.

In addition to employment problems, many unions have concerned themselves with the off-the-job experiences of their Puerto Rican members. Recognizing that Puerto Ricans are recent arrivals who are unfamiliar with community resources and face serious problems of health, housing, finance, and education, a large number of New York City unions offer assistance through counseling about community services, representation before agencies, and orientation toward life in the city. In the opinion of many union officials, the family and personal problems of Puerto Ricans are as pressing as their employment difficulties. New members tend to look to the union as home away from home; they come to the office with all kinds of questions ranging from what to do with unpaid bills to school dropouts and even marital difficulties. Through these methods—counseling, representation, and education—labor unions have helped Puerto Rican members to adapt to community life.

Finally, unions encourage citizenship and community participation. In connection with its own political action campaigns, the New York City Central Labor Council and many of its member unions have tried to involve Puerto Rican members, appealing to them in Spanish and campaigning on issues of special interest.

Within individual unions, there are many efforts to involve Puerto Rican members in community action campaigns. Notable is the Neighborhood Council program of the Hotel Trades Council in which members are organized on a neighborhood basis to deal with problems of everyday living in New York City.

While union leaders differ among themselves with respect to the merits of special outreach, particularly when this involves separate or distinctive programs by ethnic group, New York City unions have re-

sponded to the growing number of Puerto Ricans in their ranks with a variety of services, including language instruction, leadership training, cultural and recreational activities, community service counseling, job-related training, and political action.

What is ahead? Will the frustrations of Puerto Rican members be mobilized in militant action outside or within the union structure? Or will unions respond to the needs and desires of their Puerto Rican constituents as they have to other challenges in the past? In part, this means strengthening the normal functions of unionism to provide better servicing of on-the-job complaints and open channels for expression of differing viewpoints within the organization. In addition, it may call for imaginative new approaches to problems of community living. Puerto Ricans look to their unions as the major organizations with which they have continuing contact. If they are to be assimilated and involved, and supportive, they expect to see concrete results on the questions that concern them: jobs, income, education, and housing. They want to see the full resources of the labor movement mobilized to make New York a better place to live and work.

Notes

1. See Jesus de Galindez, *Puerto Rico en Nueva York: Sociologia de una Immigracion* (Argentina: Editorial Tiempo Contemporaneo, 1969); and Cesar Andreu Iglesias, ed., *Memorias de Bernardo Vega: Una Contribucion a la Historia de la Communidad Puertorriquena en Nueva York* (Rio Piedras, P.R.: Ediciones Huracan, 1977).

2. Iglesias, *Memorias*, p. 144.

3. Lois Gray and Eddie Gonzalez, "Puerto Ricans and Labor Unions" (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, Hispanic Labor Studies Program, 1978).

4. Ibid.

5. Lois Gray, "A Socioeconomic Profile of Puerto Rican New Yorkers" (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics: Regional Report 46, July 1975), p. 87.

6. For an overview of the linkage between Puerto Ricans in New York City and the labor movement in Puerto Rico in this early period, see Iglesias, *Memorias*, pp. 123-151.

7. Clara Rodriguez, "Puerto Ricans in New York," in History Task Force, *Labor Migration Under Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), p. 209.