



FREE PUERTO RICO!

Newsletter of the Free Puerto Rico Committee,
North Americans in Solidarity with Puerto Rican Independence

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Referendum Plan Stumbles in Congress

On August 2, 1989, the US Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee narrowly passed Senate Bill 712 (SB712) which outlines the process for a referendum on Puerto Rico's status to be held in June 1991, and defines the three status options—statehood, independence or commonwealth. While US economic and military interests guided the drafting of the bill, a consensus on which status best serves US interests does not exist. The pro-statehood character of SB712, combined with a growth in support for statehood among Puerto Ricans, has mobilized anti-statehood interests in the US and Puerto Rico. These interests may force the entire Puerto Rico status project to be aborted by the US.

The unexpected increase in pro-statehood sentiment among Puerto Ricans has shaken-up the status debate by making a victory for statehood in the referendum a real possibility. At the end of August, the Puerto Rican daily, *El Nuevo Día*, conducted a poll among Puerto Ricans to determine which status option they would vote for. The results indicated that, for the first time, statehood would be favored over commonwealth, the current front-runner, by six percentage points.

The *El Nuevo Día* poll revealed that pro-statehood sentiment is concentrated among two socio-economic groups. Poor Puerto Ricans, who depend on the diverse federal aid programs funded by the US for a significant portion of their income, accounted for one portion of pro-statehood respondents. The possibility of paying federal income taxes under statehood does not intimidate this sector, since it earns too little to be taxed much. This group does, however, have some fear of the flight of jobs provided by US corporations currently operating tax-free in Puerto Rico under IRS Section 936. These corporations would lose their tax-exempt status under statehood.

Middle class Puerto Ricans concerned with economic security accounted for the other portion of statehood support. These Puerto Ricans have faith in the strength of the US economy and the stability of US institutions. Although they fear the loss of Section 936 corporations, their optimism about the US economy leads them to believe they will prosper under statehood anyway.

The growth of statehood sentiment over the last year has surprised many, especially in light of the organizational weakness of the pro-statehood New Progressive Party (PNP)



and the strong national identity and pride of the Puerto Rican people. Several elements in the discussion of the referendum itself have contributed to this increase. Firstly, the Bush Administration publicly backs statehood and the Senate legislation favors it. Support in US governing circles makes statehood appear to be a viable, and inevitable, solution. Secondly, more than 50% of the Puerto Rican population receives welfare benefits from the US government, including food stamps and subsidized housing. The press accounts of statehood have argued that these benefits will increase if Puerto Rico enters the US as a state. This could mean an increase in welfare income for Puerto Rico's poorest, most dependent sector. Thirdly, many Puerto Ricans fear the loss of US citizenship. A US Congress report issued in May 1989 declared that US citizenship for Puerto Ricans was established by legislative act and could be revoked by Congress. Puerto Ricans have traveled freely between Puerto Rico and the US for decades. Many have lived in the US and maintain close family ties in the states. Statehood would secure these ties by guaranteeing citizenship.

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Félix Matta Speaks Out Against the US Navy in Vieques...

The following interview with Félix Matta was conducted by Free Puerto Rico! in November 1989. Félix Matta is a native of the Puerto Rican island of Vieques and has been involved in the land rights struggle against the US Navy for nearly 25 years. In 1942, thousands of Puerto Ricans living on Vieques were forced to move as the US Navy seized two-thirds of the island's land. The Navy uses Vieques, and the waters off its coast, as a training ground and target range.

The mid-1970's saw a growth in resistance to the US Navy presence as Vieques returned to the island to reclaim the land that rightfully belongs to them. The conflict recently escalated in April 1989, when US marshalls attempted to evict the Matta family from land claimed by the US Navy. The marshalls burned all the family's belongings in a supposed "accident" during the eviction. Félix remains on the land, and is now surrounded by 50 other families who have seized land for themselves in defiance of the US Navy occupation.



FPR! How did you get involved in the struggle against the US Navy on Vieques?

Félix: I got involved in the struggle because Vieques is my family's home. We have been told by the government that Vieques cannot be developed because there is not enough land. I later found out that before the 1940's, Vieques had been able to support itself and support people from Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. Puerto Ricans came to settle in Vieques because there was no unemployment in the days before the Navy came. I found out that the minute the Navy came into Vieques, all the employment that was available disappeared. Now the unemployment rate ranges from 80% to 85%. If people have income, it is from pensions, perhaps, or welfare or Social Security. But as far as employment is concerned, in Vieques there are ten industries that supply 313 jobs.

I am one of the few that believes that if we had access to all the land in Vieques, maybe we could develop the island for ourselves. So, in 1965 I re-

turned to Vieques with a group of people and we seized 600 acres of land for the people. In 1976-78, many people worked together to seize 900 acres. In the struggle with the courts, I lost the remaining 267 acres that comprised my home at Monte Carmelo. I suffered a heart attack and had to have open heart surgery. So, I couldn't fight back any more.

It was not until 1986 that I came back, and I started fighting back in 1986-88. I had my own house built on the lost 267 acres on Monte Carmelo. While I was there, the Navy came in. They were persecuting me, but a court never issued

an injunction or anything like that to stop me for constructing a complete house worth thousands of dollars. In the meantime, other people were following me and were doing the same thing. Right now, at Monte Carmelo, we have close to 50 houses or 50 families that live there. In addition to Monte Carmelo, we have thirty more families that are willing to develop behind our land and live among us. We are already talking about the Monte Carmelo Family Association for people who are interested in planting the land we have secured.

There is a lot of land is doing nothing over there, the land is open, it's hostile, it's wild, and the Navy never uses it. That's why we set our eyes on it. The people need it. It was because of the Navy being here that there is no land, there are no hospitals, no schools, no universities, no employment, there is no peace.

That was the reason that I had to part with my family and leave Vieques at one time. That is the reason why everyone on Vieques had to emigrate to go somewhere else, to the United States, to the Virgin Islands, anywhere in the world because we just couldn't stay here.

Then I saw it, I blamed the Navy, I keep blaming the Navy. I decided that sooner or later, one way or the other, I don't know how, but the Navy will be pushed out either by us or by the help that we are going to get from wherever it comes. We are even calling on the Martians to come in and help. But we are going to push them out, we need the island of Vieques for the Viequeses.

It is 1989, the days when my grandfather could not read or write are gone. In 1989 a little six-year-old kid knows his rights and privileges. We are going to speak out on human



rights. The first thing that the Navy and the US Congress have to do, without any hassle, without any kind of game, is to order the fleet of the North Atlantic to disappear from the island of Vieques and leave the Viequeses alone.

When it comes to the defense of the American nation, Puerto Rico has shed more blood than any other state per capita, if you want to talk about that. So I don't think we are asking for any favors because we shed blood and it is the right of human beings to keep and maintain the piece of land we inherited by nature. I think we deserve it, not because someone gave it to us, but because we were born with it.

FPR! Could you tell us about the US Navy response when Hurricane Hugo hit Vieques?

Félix: Hugo came by at one hundred-fifty miles per hour. It hit the Northwest side of the island destroying a lot of the houses built by the settlers. They left in an attempt to save their lives. They had to hide in concrete structures in town somewhere. But they could never go back to the housing site because, right after Hugo passed, the Navy was waiting with their bulldozers. Whatever was left of the houses after the hurricane, the Navy bulldozers buried. Then the Navy put up two barricades on local roads to keep people from going into the 633 acres that had been seized by the people. The Navy called us invaders, now we call them invaders. We are Viequeses, they are the Navy. No matter where the Navy comes from, the United States, Spain, or from the planet Mars, we don't care! We were born on Vieques. It's our island.

FPR! How do you think the anti-Navy struggle on Vieques is related to the overall goal of Puerto Rican independence?

Félix: Vieques is part of Puerto Rico, Puerto Rico is an archipelago. We maintain that Vieques, Roosevelt Roads, El Yunque and Sebaná Seca all belong to the nation of Puerto Rico, not the US government. The US is having problems with the Philippine Islands, it's having problems with Panama, it's having problems with Nicaragua, it's having problems with Cuba, it's having problems with everybody. It will continue having problems. The US believes that it can outsmart everybody. You can fool people for a while, but eventually somebody's going to catch up with the trick. That's what's happening. Everywhere there's a little bit fight, a cock fight, a dog fight, there goes the United States government right into the fight. They enter into struggles that do not belong to them. Why don't they leave the people alone, let everybody solve their own problems. The struggle for Puerto Rican independence is related to the struggle against the Navy because Vieques is part of the nation of Puerto Rico and the US has no right to interfere.

Newsbriefs...

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Ruth Reynolds, a North American supporter of Puerto Rican independence died on December 3, 1989. Ruth was a writer who worked with Nationalist Party leader Pedro Albizu Campos and founded the League of Americans for Independence for Puerto Rico. She was incarcerated for supporting Puerto Rican independence in the 1950's. Ruth maintained active support for independence until the day she died...the **Ninth Conference of Heads of State and Government of the Non-Aligned Nations**, which took place in Belgrade, Yugoslavia September 4-7, 1989, demanded the freedom and unconditional amnesty for all Puerto Rican independence activists incarcerated for political reasons and reaffirmed the right of the Puerto Rican people to self-determination and independence...the **First Cuban Conference of Criminology** held in Havana, Cuba November 21-22, 1989 passed a Special Resolution condemning the incarceration of activists that struggle for social justice and for the independence of Puerto Rico...a recent **Department of Health report on population statistics in Puerto Rico** revealed an overall decline in population and an increase in the average age of residents. The statistics, collected in 1986, documented a one-year decline of 6,900 people and an increase in the median age from 24 in 1980, to 28 years of age in 1986...the **US Supreme Court** will hear an appeal by the federal prosecutor of Hartford to recover electronic evidence suppressed in the case of the nine *independentistas* arrested on August 30, 1985 on charges stemming from the \$7.2 million Wells Fargo expropriation. Previously, a judge had ruled to suppress the tapes in the summer of 1988, because they were not properly sealed by FBI agents as required by federal law. A ruling by the Supreme Court will be handed down in June 1990...a recent **environmental study** conducted by a private company discovered that 14 acres within the naval base at Roosevelt Roads in Ceiba and six others in Vieques, are highly polluted with dangerous materials dumped by the US military. The pollution is affecting the underground and surface coastal waters east of the island, particularly the rivers of Ceiba, and the Vieques passage...On November 12, 1989, in the **first pro-choice march in Puerto Rico**, 200 rallied in San Juan to support abortion rights in an action sponsored by a coalition composed of feminist groups and clinics...two days earlier the **First Congress on Puerto Rican Women and Health** adopted a pro-choice resolution two to one...the **Department of Psychology at the University of Puerto Rico** recently published *Brutality, Repression and Psychology: The Case of Alejandina Torres*.

Referendum...

Until now, anti-statehood forces, including the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP), have not taken the threat of statehood seriously. As pro-statehood influence becomes more visible, anti-statehood forces in Puerto Rico and the US are allying and mounting an offensive that may halt the referendum process as it enters its next phase in the US House of Representatives. The pro-commonwealth Popular Democratic Party (PPD) and Section 936 corporations (among them Eli Lilly & Co., Johnson & Johnson, Pepsico Inc., and General Electric Co.) are spending millions of dollars to lobby Congress and to publicize the negative effects of statehood—loss of jobs and capital flight—in Puerto Rico.

The pressure of anti-statehood forces is already evident in the House of Representatives. On November 6, 1989, Congressman Morris Udall, Chairman of the House Committee on the Interior (the committee that has jurisdiction over Puerto Rico in the House) sent a letter to Senator J. Bennett Johnston stating his opposition to SB712. Udall argues that the Senate bill lacks the unanimous support of the three Puerto Rican political parties. Additionally, Udall and other congressmen disagree with the self-executing clause of the bill. This clause provides for automatic execution of the status option that wins a 50% majority in the referendum, without further review by Congress. Fearing strong opposition in Puerto Rico and the US, these congressmen do not want to be locked into statehood should it win the referendum.

Udall proposes that the House committee begin the drafting process all over again, starting with an invitation to the three Puerto Rican parties to present their status definitions.

Many believe that statehood will not fare as well in the House as it did in the Senate. By this time, anti-statehood lobbying is fully underway. House members are more susceptible to local pressure—which is more likely to be anti-statehood—than senators. Moreover, if statehood is not self-executing under the referendum, it is less likely to be viewed as a viable option by Puerto Ricans, since it can be denied by the US Congress after the vote.

The growth in pro-statehood sentiment demonstrates the strength and effectiveness of 91 years of US colonial domination in Puerto Rico. The pro-statehood sectors identified by the *El Nuevo Día* poll are motivated by material dependence and a colonial mentality consciously cultivated by the US to weaken the Puerto Rican people's will to fight for their right to self-determination and independence.

With a 40% unemployment rate; 65% of the population living under the poverty level; and, over 50% receiving food stamps, subsidized housing and other welfare benefits, the US has forced a significant portion of the Puerto Rican population to depend on it for material survival itself. In addition, through control of education and the media, the US has promoted a colonial mentality—the belief of a colonized people that they are inferior and dependent on the colonizer—by undermining the attitude of Puerto Ricans towards themselves, their culture and their heritage. Increased support for statehood underscores the task of the independence movement to combat colonial control and offer a strong alternative vision to the Puerto Rican people.

“...a militant boycott campaign by independentistas delegitimizes the referendum...”

Currently, a campaign to boycott the referendum is being organized in Puerto Rico by socialist organizations and individuals within the independence movement. The purpose of the boycott campaign is to expose the referendum as a colonial farce and to denounce the process as failing to address the social ills that exist in Puerto Rico as a result of nearly a century of US colonial rule.

Statehood is not a foregone conclusion. Strong forces opposed—Section 936 corporations and the pro-commonwealth PPD—have very powerful friends in Washington, D.C. Moreover, a militant boycott campaign by *independentistas* delegitimizes the referendum—making statehood difficult to justify on the international level.

Compelling reasons exist for the US not to grant statehood. The US must consider the national security risk of admitting a Spanish-speaking, Latin American state with an active independence movement into the union. One need only examine the unrest in the Soviet republics to anticipate the potential problems. The fact that Puerto Rico is a part of Latin America would also add a tense element to US-Latin American relations.

Free Puerto Rico Committee is a national organization that works to develop understanding and support for the struggle of the Puerto Rican people—invaded and seized by the US military in 1898—to liberate their nation and to establish an independent socialist society. As North Americans, we in **FPRC** work under the leadership of the **Movimiento de Liberación Nacional Puertorriqueño**, a US-based organization of Puerto Rican patriots. We have written material, slide and film programs on such topics as the 2020 Plan, the history of Puerto Rico and the independence movement. Please write or call the chapter nearest you to obtain a brochure, or to set up an audiovisual program and discussion.

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