

In Puerto Rico working people, organized and unorganized, have received a huge burden within the adjustments that have been made by the different government administrations that have alternated in the past 12 years. We are referring specifically to the administration of Aníbal Acevedo Vilá (2004-2008), Luis Fortuño (2008-2012), Alejandro García Padilla (2012-2016) and the current governor Ricardo Roselló Nevares.

Under the pretext of dealing with the serious fiscal and economic situation that the government of the Island experiences and which has been hastening hastily in recent years, these government administrations have decreed states of emergency to implement a series of measures that have not only been totally infectious to attend to the fiscal and economic crisis but have been a real attacks on the working class of the country and, consequently, on the labor movement.

We have seen that during these last years both the New Progressive Party and the Popular Democratic Party, parties that have alternated the power for the past four decades, have resorted to supposed solutions to attend to the fiscal crisis that faces Puerto Rico. However, these solutions have always had as a point of reference the increase of taxes and the imposition of new ones, austerity measures, aggressively cutting benefits and rights of organized workers, dismantling all the protective legislation of public and private workers in the Island and deprive them of all the benefits that such protection guarantees them. Little by little, and under the actions of government administrations of both political parties, unionized workers, mostly members of our sister unions, have been receiving an excessive and increasingly aggressive burden as part of these solutions to the fiscal situation. In short, it has been the workers who have paid heavily for the fiscal crisis of the government.

The administration of Luis Fortuño implemented a series of harmful measures against the workers. Among them, Law Number 7 of 2009 that had as main objective a drastic reduction of the payroll of the government. This reduction, based on the belief of savings in government spending by dismantling agencies and cutting services, had as one of its consequences that 30,000 public employees were fired. In addition, Law Number 7 had an immediate impact on the negotiation of the economic articles of all Collective Agreements under Law Number 45, which guarantees them the right to public workers to organize and bargain with their employers. All the unions that

represent employees in the public service made a common front in protest and in the taking of actions against that law 7. Mass protests, nationwide strikes, marches, rallies, picket lines in front of government office and different points of the island. The legality of law 7 was also challenged in court, both at the state and federal level, but this route was unsuccessful. The government's reaction to all this was to use the judicial apparatus to obtain injunctions to stop peaceful strikes in public corporations apart from the excessive use of the police force which eventually led to the designation of a federal monitor over the police force in Puerto Rico. Also with the measures imposed by Fortuño workers of the private sector were also affected, with the elimination of the provision of the law that required double payment of the hours worked on Sunday.

Undoubtedly Law Number 7 was one of the most critical moments of the Puerto Rican trade union movement. This law not only involved the dismissal of workers and the effect of the economic clauses of the Collective Agreement, with the serious consequences that this implied for the families affected and for the economy of the country, but it was a critical juncture because it opened the door for other austerity measures and additional cuts to the right and benefits of organized public workers of the island. In addition, as a direct effect of the implementation of this law and dismissals, employees who remained in their jobs suffered a brutal increase in their daily workload. The equation is very simple: after the lay off less workers would be performing the work in the agencies which involved a clear increase of work and at the same time a reduction of salary because the worker will be doing much more for equal pay.

Under the administration of Alejandro García Padilla, unionized workers again received a new burden as part of the measures taken by the government to address the fiscal situation. The approval of Law number 66 also supposed a new offensive to deprive benefits to unionized workers. This law was a new version of Law Number 7, approved by Fortuño, but without dismissing public employees. However, although no works were lay-off the Unions in the public sectors were forced to enter into a negotiation on the economic clauses of the Conventions. This negotiation with the unions was directed and supervised directly by the Secretary of the Interior and by the Office of Management and Budget. Law number 66 sought to reduce the amounts negotiated in the Conventions by way of Christmas Bonuses and to withdraw, for a number of specific years, the negotiation of all other economic articles. As a measure of

pressure from the government, the unions had to enter into a negotiation and sign an agreement agreeing on the new working benefits and conditions. As with Act Number 7, the workers suffered a cut in benefits and the door was closed again for gain economic justice in the workplace. Likewise, private sector workers received an impact as they Garcia Padilla administration legislated the elimination of five holidays, apart from an increase in the IVU (saletax), imposed by the government of Aníbal Acevedo Vilá, from 7 to 11.5 percent.

At the same time that Law Number 7 and then Law Number 66 were being implemented the idea that a labor reform aimed at the working class in general gained strength in Puerto Rico. The idea had proponents and supporters within the governmental spheres, of both parties, and the business sectors of the Island represented by several of their organizations. The main argument to push such labor reform, at least publicly, is that Puerto Rico should reduce and even dismantle its labor protection laws to make the Island more attractive to companies that would generate jobs. That is to say, according to the proponents of this idea would only create jobs in Puerto Rico and would improve the economy if eliminating labor protection laws.

After several attempts to implement this labor reform, the current government administration culminated this process by approving a labor reform bill in less than two weeks of discussion without even having presented evidence or studies to supports its claims. Many of the protections contained in the legislation were at least 80 years old. The labor reform completely disrupts what workers' rights have been in terms of the way they pay and compute overtime, reduce the accumulation of vacation days, and sick days, reduce the amount of the payment of Christmas bonus, the probation period is increased, the amount to be paid for unjustified dismissal is reduced and limits and now the burden of proof to show unjustified dismissal falls on the workers.

In line with this labor reform legislation, the Roselló government imposed two new laws directly affecting unionized workers. First, the Government's law as Single Employer that provides the government with the mobility of workers between agencies without taking into consideration crucial aspects such as the appropriate unit represented by an exclusive representative or the Collective Agreement that shelters that employee. The last bill approved by the House of Representatives and the Senate of Puerto Rico, known as the P

of the C. 938 is the final thrust of the government to the unionized workers because with this legislation they suspend all the Collective Agreements in the governmental agencies and in The Public Corporations. In such a way, unionized workers are deprived of all their rights and benefits negotiated in their Conventions and the situation of the private sector is repeated by automatically reducing their days of vacations, sick days, holidays and other licenses. Contribution to the medical plan, overtime is eliminated. In essence, this new legislation eliminates collective bargaining in the public sector, which was guaranteed by Law No. 45 of 1998 and the Constitution of Puerto Rico.

But not only the rights of workers and their current working conditions have been affected. But their perspective of enjoying a decent retirement has also been overturned by laws such as Law 160 of 2013 for teachers of the public system and Law 3 of 2017 for public employees in general. Public employees saw both the years of service and the age requirements to retire increase. But also the percentage of money they would receive for retirement decrease, and other retirements benefits eliminated.

These measures have impoverished the Puerto Rican working class and have banished the most basic rights to which a worker should have access. In general, the sums of these measures have led us to deepen the recession and a greater contraction of the economy. We suggest that in order to deal with the fiscal and economic crisis, austerity measures should be discarded and measures such as the revision of fiscal incentives, debt audit, debt restructuring, a new development policy, productivity and investment incentives, guarantees and collective bargaining, parity of funding in Medicaid, a measurement of results, and assessment of the Jones Act and energy costs.

We are convinced that Puerto Rico needs urgent attention on very serious matters, but that urgency should never be taken as an excuse for things to be done in a rash and irresponsible manner. The country, our people, the workers, the elderly, and our childhood are paying the critical consequences of bad decisions and projects and measures adopted lightly. And today, witnessing the way the process is being carried out on this crucial project, we have to raise our voice and denounce that we keep repeating the same mistakes and are condemning ourselves to continue paying the consequences.