

The N.R.A. in the Tropics

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WHEN Boaz Long, N.R.A. coordinator for Puerto Rico, arrived in San Juan he was welcomed by officials committees and taken out to the fine Condado-Vanderbilt Hotel. A day later he found himself marooned near the capital with a pleasant view of the ocean and of little else. Delegations of chauffeurs complained to him of the high price of gasoline, but broken glass and tacks strewn on the roads, as well as crowds of strikers who had taken over the streets, prevented him from touring the island to discover what lay behind a paralysis of transportation that was both sudden and complete.

Its causes should interest Mr. Long particularly, for nowhere under the Stars and Stripes has the New Deal proved more ruinous than in Puerto Rico. Four years ago prices in the island were 25 percent higher than in New York City. This ratio was maintained during the years of world crisis, which has proved even more devastating in the colonies than in the home countries. And now, since Roosevelt's inauguration, the cost of living has risen another 33 percent, although colonial wages still prevail.

The high cost of living under American rule is the first shock one sustains on getting off the boat in San Juan. The most exclusive shops of the capital sell Fourteenth Street goods at Fifth Avenue prices. A set of tin doll furniture, for instance, that could be picked up on a New York curb for ten cents, retails for \$1.25. The cheapest clothes, shoes, and house furnishings are priced like objets d'art. As for food, even a tourist feels hungry in Puerto Rico. He is aware that everything on the menu came as he did across the ocean, and he feels that he must ration himself as if he were eating in a desert. Native fruits are as scarce and dear as apples and grapes. Sixteen years ago one could buy Puerto Rican oranges at two for a penny. Now they cost five cents apiece.

What is the effect of this tremendous gap between wages and prices on the Puerto Ricans? How does one live in a model colony?

The great majority of the Puerto Ricans—the workers and peasants—have been forced to adopt a Hooverville style of residence. The slums outside the neat capital look exactly like our American unemployed settlements, except that they are perched on stilts and often thrust far out over the waters of a malaria-breeding swamp. There is the same crowding that one sees in the self-made villages on the East River, for here sugar must be raised on every inch of arable soil. The building material is the same—bits of wood, pieces of corrugated tin, and all kinds of odds and ends. But these shacks are not the novel fruits of a “depression.”

They are the regular homes of the city workers. And neither in the city slums nor in the cane fields is any space left for raising a banana tree, not to speak of a garden.

Under present conditions in the Caribbean, sugar can only be regarded as a disease. In Puerto Rico it spreads like a green blight from the ocean into every cranny of the hills, flooding the arable soil of the island for the benefit of absentee American corporations. Puerto Ricans have taken to the sea shore and built little houses far over the tide. They have taken to the great clay hills, where a peasant has to rope himself to a stake to keep from falling while he hoes a garden set at an angle of forty-five degrees. Down on the coastal plain, which is a solid green sea of sugar, long lines of agricultural workers set out before dawn to work in the fields. For ten hours they cut cane, under the broiling sun. They must stand in irrigation ditches in their bare feet. The leaves of cane are sharp and cut like paper. The stalk itself is covered with irritating bristles. (The kind of cane the companies are “pushing” at present is the worst variety as far as bristles are concerned, but has the highest sucrose content). Workers who cannot buy shoes can hardly afford gloves. For this work they receive six cents an hour, now in the harvesting season. And yet the prices they must pay for food are higher than those paid by a worker living in the Bronx.

The agricultural workers in the big sugar corporations live in company barracks, but “barracks” is a complimentary term for the human dog kennels that are set down in the middle of the cane without a green shoot of vegetables growing around them. The worker must buy his rice at company stores, where his \$3.60 a week is worth even less than it is in the other stores on the island.

Though the workers of the cities and sugar fields live in worse than oriental squalor, one might expect to find villages in the interior where the tropical peasant lives at ease under a breadfruit tree. But the thick core of great hills that runs through Puerto Rico is composed of clay. Except for some coffee plantations and a little tobacco, they stand in barren solitude, foodless and treeless. Take an average American Hooverville, spatter it on the side of one of these bare hills, put one or two banana trees in the background, and you have an accurate picture of a Puerto Rican village. Handsome children with green eyes and Indian skins stand at the doors of their shacks, their legs crooked from malnutrition and their bellies bulging with hookworm. There is no milk, for the grazing land has long gone the way of sugar, and one must have shoes to avoid hookworm. Sugar is planted in the hollows, and sometimes up the sides at

a perilous angle. But near the top of the hill where the village stands, the land is worthless. Whatever good soil it once possessed has conveniently run down to the sugar land that is controlled by some absentee American corporation.

A large New York store recently advertised a special sale of handkerchiefs. “To save expense,” it announced, “we had them hand-rolled in Puerto Rico.” Fourteen hundred miles away!

Americans from New York have found another lucrative use for Puerto Rico. In Mayaguez, the third largest city on the island, fifty garment shops hum away at New York speed. One passes by an old Spanish house and catches a glimpse inside of rows of girls bent over electric sewing machines. Needlework, which was introduced by Spanish nuns and, as a handicraft, once reached an extraordinarily high level, is now done by machine on cheap goods imported from the United States. Handwork is sent out to the homes.

During a cloudburst, we took shelter in a small hut where a middle-aged woman was at work on a pile of home work. She was hand-rolling large squares of cheap, crudely printed cloth and complained of eye strain. When we asked her how much she received for the work, she said, “Thirteen cents a dozen. Yes, I know that's cheap, but I'd rather work here at home than kill myself in the shops. There they work from seven in the morning until eight at night. They have a half-hour off for lunch. And they only get from two to three dollars a week. You can't have chicken soup on that.” Then she made an extraordinary remark. Her daughter had recovered from an illness. “You should see her now,” she said smiling gladly. “She almost looks like an American.”

A bitter strike in these shops some months ago resulted in the death of a striker and a 30 percent increase in wages, sixty cents more a week. Their slogan now is a dollar a day.

That night Christmas Eve, we saw some of the bosses of the industry. Three fat business men, typical products of New York's garment center, sat dolefully in a corner of a large tourist inn. They were in shirt sleeves and were sadly drinking highballs, listening to “Silent Night, Holy Night,” on the radio from New York, a pitiful group of exiles.

Where is the upper class of this tropical Hooverville? There isn't any, by American standards. Puerto Rico is absentee owned. Its rulers live on the Park Avenues of the world. A few wealthy Puerto Rican families, who have made fortunes through the American sugar corporations, may be found in the

largest towns, but trading, professional activities, and culture are left in the hands of a middle class. Shop-keepers, doctors and lawyers, teachers and small landowners, whose output is controlled by the big centrals, have a standard of living about equal to that of an American factory worker. Monopoly prices that prevail in a model colony force them to buy shoes, clothes, furniture and live in houses that would be scorned by a good American mechanic. This middle class is restive after four years of economic crisis. Vague articles about the Soviet Union, Italy, and the N.R.A. appear side by side in their publications. A handsome edition of *Das Kapital* in Spanish is sold in the bookstores. A deep dislike of the Americans runs through all groups on the island, and when the workers take the lead, as they did in the gasoline strike, the middle class gives them enthusiastic support.

A dispatch on the recent gasoline strike in Puerto Rico concludes that Boaz Long "was told that his official status would not assure his safety or make it possible for his car to go through the nail-strewn roads."

This is perhaps the only statement that appeared in the metropolitan press indicating the magnitude of the first mass upsurge in the history of America's model colony.

With the exception of one narrow-gauge railway partly encircling the island, and private sugar central tracks, insular transportation is done by automobile. Trucks carry freight. Large public buses and suburban surface electric tramways ply in the larger towns, but passenger traffic is largely handled by what is known as a public car. These automobiles are rented at exorbitant rates by drivers who maintain them and supply their own gasoline and oil. Seats are sold for trips of various lengths, the price being determined by bargaining between driver and patron. American gasoline companies had been charging twenty-five cents a gallon. A newspaper, *El Imparcial*, carried a campaign against the companies. Then rumors spread that the price would rise to twenty-seven cents.

A small and humble chauffeurs Local, (affiliate of the Puerto Rican Federation of Labor, in turn an affiliate of the A. F. of L.) in Mayaguez was the first to take action. They raised the black flag of protest and paraded the streets the morning of the day after Christmas. By noon the city was devoid of traffic and by 11 P. M. it gave the appearance of being completely deserted. Shutters and doors were closed. Only oxen were allowed to haul luggage to the jammed railroad station.

By 11 A. M. of the next day the entire island was completely tied up, with the exception of San Juan, where a boat load of tourists was expected any minute. Labor leaders and local officials, urged by the united pleas of tourist agencies and steamship companies, managed to delay the strike in order to give the tourists a ridiculous whirl around the center of the city. Meanwhile, workers and country people were barricading the highways. At noon, in spite of the protests of

the union leaders, rank-and-file chauffeurs dumped the tourists and made cordons across strategic points. By one o'clock it was decided to enlarge the strike to cover general transportation, and the street-car motormen joined the chauffeurs. All horse-driven vehicles were stopped.

By this time strikers and sympathizers, who included practically the whole population of Puerto Rico, had taken over the highways and streets and were policing them. Some idea of the firmness of their intentions may be gathered from the fact that Chief of Police, Colonel Riggs, finally gave up the attempt to drive to the suburbs after receiving twenty-nine punctures. The newspapers called frantically for a strike committee. But the union leadership was too demoralized to answer. Several days later the gasoline companies capitulated.

The enthusiastic Puerto Ricans are now discussing a strike against the power companies. And how about lowering the price of rice and beans? The N.R.A. coordinator will be busy.

What can the N.R.A. do for Puerto Rico? From the point of view of dividends, American rule has already been 100 percent efficient. In an ideal climate, Puerto Rico now has the distinction of possessing the highest death rate from tuberculosis in the western hemisphere. If prices continue to rise, if the land continues in the hands of American corporations, if wages remain what they are—in short, if the whole policy of Washington toward its model colony is allowed to continue, literal mass starvation will result. Subsidies to the grasping sugar corporations will not raise the wages of the cane-cutters by a penny. As shown by the gasoline strike, the salvation of Puerto Rico lies in the hands of Puerto Rican masses themselves.

They say in the island that President Roosevelt intends visiting it in March and that a pleasant little house is being prepared for him near the Palace. His friends might suggest to him that he take along a supply of canned goods, and that even an armored car might come in handy.

P. S. He Got the Job

Dear Sir: Herewith I offer you my record strictly confidential; since men insist your time is dear, I list now only what's essential:

you crave a man experienced
"who's proved that he can advertise—"
there's not a mortal more adept
than I in shaping sugared lies.

My proof: for 3 fat years I wrote
slogans for Flynn & Schlesinger's,
and pumped the firm with pelf I coaxed
from underpaid stenographers

and clerks and other starving such
not bitter enough as yet to rob
to make themselves presentable
sufficiently to hold a job. . . .

Your firm, I think, is quite ideal
for such a swindler's gift as mine.
I'm frank—but still full well I know
to be forgiving is divine—

the final business truth, of course:
a kind of all-forgiving grace
for those who to subsist must keep
exploiting a stunned human race.

Besides, though you'll suspect that I'm
"idealistic," I insist
I know you too must live! I am
a "practical idealist" . . .

Doubtless you too are Liberal—
we'll get on swimmingly together,
bolting the windows, drawing blinds
whenever there is threatening weather.

Re salary: I understand.
You'll pay as "fairly as you can."
A jobless man can't name his price,
so rest assured I am your man.

Accept me for about one-eighth
of what my normal wage should be;
and as I swell your bank account
please threaten that you'll fire me

so that I'll labor twice as hard;
and with your money and my mind
I'll hypnotize with words, while you
can pick their pockets from behind . . .

I have a vision of success,
vast endless sums we shall secure—
it's easy when they're desperate
to pilfer pennies from the poor.

And now I close this billet-doux
with supplication and amen
that you will lay your choice on me
instead of fifty other men

one half of whom must surely need
the job much more just now . . . Oh please
don't let your heart be influenced
if someone begs you on his knees—

let me at least enjoy the knowledge
that this time I have helped to bring
another human brother nearer
the living deaths of suffering.

(Editor's Note: *The author wrote:
"Don't sign my name" and fired at us:
"This writer needs a job and knows
that Truth can't ask for business status!"*)