

Massive abstention in Puerto Rican statehood referendum

By Rafael Azul
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On Sunday, June 11, a non-binding referendum took place in Puerto Rico, polling Puerto Ricans on the political status of Washington's Caribbean colony. Voters were asked to choose between three alternatives for the island: US statehood, independence (and an "improved" association with the US), or the current system—a US territory with a measure of political control over its internal affairs since 1952 (an associated free state) but no representation in the US Congress.

The polling was either ignored or repudiated by more than 2.1 million out of the 2.6 million eligible voters (nearly 80 percent).

The overwhelming majority of those who did vote, 97.17 percent, or 466,000, chose statehood, the option favored by Governor Ricardo Rosselló and his pro-statehood New Progressive Party (PNP). Some 7,600 voted for free association/independence; about 6,700 opted for the current territorial status.

The total number of pro-statehood votes fell by 300,000 compared to a similar referendum that took place in 2012. PNP leaders attribute this drop to the mass exodus taking place from this financially crippled territory. A decade-long economic collapse is forcing the emigration of thousands of Puerto Ricans every month to Miami, Chicago and other cities on the US mainland.

In a speech on Sunday evening, announcing the results, Rosselló applauded the pro-statehood victory, ignored the mass abstention, and declared his intention of convincing the US Congress to initiate the transition to US statehood for Puerto Rico.

Governor Rosselló had organized the referendum and campaigned for statehood as a so-called alternative to colonial status, mostly as a distraction from Puerto Rico's economic debacle, with the island territory's

debt reaching \$120 billion, its poverty rate 46 percent and its schools, health care and pension systems in a state of collapse.

For his part, Hector Ferrer, president of the second largest party, the pro-commonwealth Popular Democratic Party (PPD), which is more closely aligned with the Democrats in the US, declared that Rosselló had been the "big loser" in the referendum, because of the record abstentionism, the largest since 1967.

The PPD, together with the pro-independence PIP, had called on voters to boycott the election, as had the striking University of Puerto Rico student body.

At the same time, neither the PPD nor the PIP organized any rallies or protests against the referendum, undoubtedly preferring that potential voters "go to the beach," a phrase chosen by Ferrer.

Undoubtedly none these forces, or for that matter, the Puerto Rican trade unions, well aware of the explosive conditions that are affecting Puerto Rican workers and youth, would risk mobilizations that could rapidly get out of control.

There was one act of protest in San Juan. As the results started to come in about 500 *independentistas* rallied at the Electoral Commission in San Juan, rejecting statehood. The demonstrators waved Puerto Rican flags and burned those from the US, while chanting "fire, fire; the *Yanquis* want fire!" The demonstration included members of the pseudo-left such as *Se Acabaron Las Promesas* (No more promises), The Revolutionary Puerto Rican Workers Party—*Macheteros*, the Feminist Collective, as well as groups that reject US financial supervision over Puerto Rico's budget. For all its bluster, the rally presented no alternative to resolve the crisis gripping Puerto Rican society.

The historically low voter turnout did not just result

from the boycott calls by the PPD and PIP; it follows a low voter turnout of 55 percent in November 2016, when Rosselló was elected, down from turnouts of 70 or even 80 percent in the previous elections.

This growing mass abstention reflects popular disgust with all of the capitalist political alternatives on offer and the prevailing view among Puerto Rican workers, students and the lower middle class that the real power is in the hands of the Financial Oversight Board that is managing Puerto Rico's bankruptcy and in those of the US Congress.

Another issue affecting the low turnout is that many Puerto Ricans are critical of the \$8 million cost of the election, at a time when schools, hospitals and pensions are under attack.

Whether the formal status of the island is changed to that of a US state or "sovereign" nation, or it continues as a colonial "free associated state," the brutal capitalist exploitation of Puerto Rican workers will continue as will Wall Street's demands for draconian austerity policies to meet payments to billionaire bondholders.

In the past, the US Congress has shown little interest in changing Puerto Rico's status, while President Donald Trump has made clear his administration's opposition to a bailout. Given the likelihood that as a state Puerto Rico would send five more Democrats to the House and two to the Senate, there is no support within the Republican congressional leadership for acting on the dubious results of Sunday's referendum.

The Trump White House issued a statement Monday washing its hands of the matter: "This referendum is nonbinding and only Congress can change Puerto Rico's status."

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