

FMPR CONTEXT

The Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico (FMPR) was founded in 1966 by a group of teachers who decided that they needed a union that would struggle for the improvement of the working conditions and salaries of the educational workers. At that time, teachers had six groups of 50 students and had to work 11 months/year, earning less than \$200 a month. Dress codes were very strict: women (80% of members) had to wear long dresses and men had to wear over coats with ties in a year round tropical climate of at least 85 degrees. Most schools were made of asbestos and were in very poor condition, affecting the health of students and teachers.

Teachers held a 31 day “illegal” strike in 1974 to improve living conditions. They received salary increases, women were permitted to wear pants and the government started to deal with the asbestos problem. The major victory of that strike was the formation of a new democratic leadership with a broader commitment: to fight for justice for all the workers and the poor people of Puerto Rico. For the past 40 years, FMPR members have been major activists in all social struggles that have taken place on the island.

Today the basic salary of a teacher is \$1,500 a month, most school buildings are falling down and the asbestos problem is far from being resolved. Teachers are responsible for 5 groups each, most with more than 30 students. The cost of living is higher than in most of the states in the US. The government is implementing a Neoliberal strategy that facilitates the privatization of schools and other public institutions. FMPR has been the government’s major obstacle against the implementation of this plan and is intent on destroying the union. They refused to renegotiate the union’s collective bargaining agreement for nearly three years and unilaterally removed many acquired rights.

The Puerto Rican government decertified FMPR in January 2008, 2 months after a General Assembly of 7000 members of the union unanimously approved a strike vote. On January 1, Dennis Rivera, vice president of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the largest union in Change to Win, and Aida Díaz, head of the “Asociación de Maestros de Puerto Rico” (AMPR), announced that they had begun “a process of affiliation to obtain a triumph in the union elections of the Department of Education.” Dennis Hickey-Rivera is a close ally of the governor of Puerto Rico, Anibal Acevedo Vilá, and, according to dependable news sources in New York, offered the governor 3 to 4 million dollars for his election campaign this year in exchange for the elimination of FMPR and SEIU’s representation of the 43,000 teachers of Puerto Rico.

FMPR’s ten day “illegal” strike in February 2008 did not win all demands, but resulted in a salary increase, a promise to stop the privatization of schools and an agreement not to retaliate against striking members. FMPR is decertified even while the issue is being litigated—with no final judgment to date. Members are paying union dues directly.

Union elections will take place in the coming months, with FMPR facing AMPR and Dennis Rivera’s SEIU injecting perhaps millions of dollars into their campaign. FMPR leaders believe that they will win because the teachers know that it is the only organization that will defend them against the bosses.