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## **The Impact of the Black Struggle on Puerto Rican Immigrants Racist Oppression Gives Rise to Solidarity**

**by Carlito Rovira  
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The historical struggle of the African American people was the inevitable consequence of the introduction of slavery by capitalists in the Western Hemisphere. The collective experience of the African American people over the course of many generations ran parallel to the development of U.S. capitalism at every stage. Their plight, from the era of the slave trade to the present day, reveals the inherent oppression within capitalism.

Racist terror, degradation, and discrimination were the objective circumstances that compelled into existence the militant tradition of resistance in the African American masses. Their steadfastness in many key moments in history proved exemplary to the U.S. working-class movement, and particularly to other oppressed nationalities. African American history is replete with displays of genuine solidarity with other liberation struggles. The Black press, the Black church and outspoken African American figures such as W.E.B. DuBois, openly condemned the motives behind the 1898 Spanish-American War. The U.S. government and giant banking enterprises sought military conflict with Spain to win colonial control of Guam, the Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico.

Black Puerto Rican scholar Arturo Schomburg devoted his life to compiling vast collections of writings documenting significant events in Black history. Before moving to New York City's Harlem community, Schomburg was a member of the clandestine Revolutionary Committees of Puerto Rico, which organized the famous 1868 Grito de Lares uprising. He eventually became a prominent figure during the Harlem Renaissance, which challenged the ideological facets of white supremacy through the literary, visual and performing arts.

At many of his performance appearances, reknowned African American singer, actor and Communist Paul Robeson would call upon his audience for a moment of silence to express solidarity for the incarcerated Puerto Rican revolutionary nationalist leader, Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos.

The young Pedro Albizu Campos was very critical of the racism within the United States. Campos's mother was Black, which gave him first-hand insight into the impact of racist oppression. Campos's outspoken oratory against the racist practices "in the house of the empire" caught the attention of Pan-Africanist leader Marcus Garvey, who traveled to Puerto Rico to meet the renowned leader.

Despite their differences in goals and tactics, this meeting was highly symbolic for that period in history. The Russian Revolution emboldened workers' struggles and nationalist movements throughout the world, including the United States and Puerto Rico, and instilled a sense of vulnerability in the U.S. capitalist class.

### ***Black Struggle Inspires Puerto Rican Militancy***

The Spanish-American War had a significant impact on African Americans, amongst them soldiers who

were sent to wage the colonial war. Black troops resented their white officers using racial slurs against Filipino people, which were reminiscent of their own experience in the United States. Many Black soldiers defected to join the anti-colonial Filipino guerrilla army. The most notable of them was David Fagan, of the 24th Infantry Division. Fagan won the admiration and respect of the Filipino people and was made a commander in their guerrilla army.

Puerto Ricans have migrated to New York City and surrounding counties since the mid-1800s—in most cases, to escape Spanish colonial persecution. But in the years after World War II and well into the 1960s, Puerto Ricans migrated to U.S. industrial centers at an annual average rate of 63,000 due to economic hardships caused by U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico.

What the Puerto Rican migrants encountered was not what they expected when they uprooted in search of a better life. In addition to the agony of having to come to a strange land, the Puerto Rican experience now included greedy racist landlords, housing and job discrimination, cultural stigmatization by the mass media, police brutality and the terror of racist white gangs.

While Puerto Ricans began their exodus in the late 1940s African Americans were already involved in their "Great Migration" from southern states where they had been historically concentrated. Fleeing racist Jim Crow laws and Ku Klux Klan terror, more than 5 million African Americans migrated to the North, Northeast and California between the 1920s and the 1960s.

The instinct of any oppressed people is to seek allies and find ways to resist. Puerto Ricans facing the realities of colonialism and impoverishment could relate to the Civil Rights movement and were attracted to its boldness.

The Nation of Islam began to approach the newly arrived immigrants with the aim of politicizing them. And when the Black Panther Party began organizing in the Puerto Rican community of Chicago, it caused the transformation of a street youth group known as the Young Lords.

The Young Lords were the first Puerto Rican revolutionary organization to arise in the United States based on the concrete political circumstances of that nation. They were a decisive factor in the spread of militancy in the Puerto Rican communities in various U.S. cities. Like the Black Panthers, they advocated for a multinational revolution in the United States.

As this movement gained momentum, Puerto Ricans gained a sense of hope and became inspired to fight for their political and economic rights. By the second half of the 1960s, Puerto Ricans in the United States had become much more politically adept, thanks to the struggles of the African American masses.

African Americans and Puerto Ricans further developed their mutual affinity based on a resistance to racist oppression. In cities like Chicago, Philadelphia and New York, at street demonstrations and on college campuses, African American and Puerto Rican masses instinctively aligned with each other in common struggle. It was not unusual for the Black liberation flag to be accompanied by the Puerto Rican flag.

A particularly significant examples of solidarity, one which became of concern to the ruling class, is the 1969 student takeover of City College in New York City. African American and Puerto Rican students, sons and daughters of Puerto Rican immigrants, captured the attention of many throughout the U.S. when they defiantly seized control of buildings to demand free tuition in the entire City University

system. To further demonstrate their boldness, these students lowered the U.S. flag from the tallest flagpole on campus and hoisted the Black Liberation Flag (red, black & green) and the Puerto Rican Flag.

The great lessons gained from this experience are still deeply relevant today. Black oppression was instrumental in the rise of U.S. capitalism, and the African American masses have confronted head-on some of its most oppressive manifestations. Their struggle will continue to be a source of inspiration to the working class and oppressed peoples, and help forge genuine solidarity with deep consequences for struggles at home and abroad.

LONG LIVE BLACK & LATINO SOLIDARITY!

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