

Anarchism in Puerto Rico

Chuck Morse

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Anarchists had a profound influence on the revolutionary workers' movement that existed in Puerto Rico during the first and second decades of the twentieth century. Although they never built an island-wide, specifically anarchist organization and for the most part cooperated with activists from other ideological tendencies, they left a unique and lasting imprint on the history and politics of the island.

As champions of workers' self-organization, anarchists were instrumental in the formation of the Regional Workers' Federation, Puerto Rico's first labor federation, established on October 23, 1898, shortly after the island became an American colony, and modeled on the anarchist-dominated Spanish Regional Federation. Anarchists also helped found the Free Workers' Federation, which emerged from a split within the Regional Workers' Federation between those leaning toward the Republican Party and those demanding independence from all "bourgeois parties." The Free Workers' Federation was the principal labor organization on the island for many years and led major strikes among sugarcane, cigar, and tobacco workers.

Cultural ventures were integral to anarchists' overall revolutionary strategy, as a means to foster working-class solidarity and prepare them to govern society after the anticipated collapse of capitalism. Anarchists published newspapers, books, and pamphlets, organized reading rooms and workers' centers, and sponsored theatrical groups, among other endeavors. The ubiquitous poverty and illiteracy among their intended audience prompted anarchists to communicate their ideals in innovative ways. For instance, radical workers often selected and paid other workers to be "readers," reading revolutionary literature to them while laboring in factories.

These initiatives spread the anarchist message throughout the island, nurturing a strong anti-capitalist and anti-political sentiment among many workers. Anarchists also opened the world of ideas to men and women who would have likely been excluded otherwise, in turn transforming Puerto Rican culture. In this regard, anarcha-feminist organizer, playwright, and occasional "reader" Luisa Capetillo is among the most distinguished militants.

Anarchists lost influence in the labor movement in the second decade of the century, never to regain it since, due to state repression and factional struggles within the Free Workers' Federation. In addition, anarchists were unable to take a strong position on the island's colonial status, which became the central issue in Puerto Rican political life. As revolutionary internationalists and anti-statists, anarchists argued that it mattered little whether native or foreign elites ruled the island if capitalist domination remained intact.

Paradoxically, anarchism's rejection of the dominant terms of political debate in Puerto Rico provides an enduring appeal for those drawn to radical social alternatives. For example, anarchism is an ideological point of reference for participants in the island's punk rock movement.

SEE ALSO: Anarchism and Culture, 1840–1939 ; Anarchism in the United States to 1945 ; Anarchism in the United States, 1946–Present ; Anarchism, Spain ; Anarchosyndicalism

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