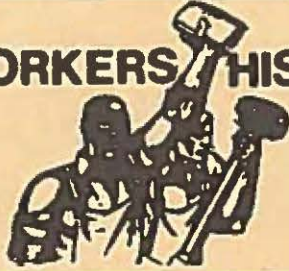


WORKERS HISTORY



Puerto Rican Workers in Hawaii

(Brother Adolf Samuels and his wife Queenie, both veteran UPW members, helped The Organizer gather some information about Puerto Rican workers in Hawaii. Brother Samuels is a strong supporter of Ethnic Studies and workers' history, and urged the Oahu Division's support for the embattled Ethnic Studies Program at U.H.)

The largest immigration of Puerto Ricans to Hawaii occurred between 1900 and 1901, in a series of 11 expeditions. An agent of the Territorial government, Albert Minville recruited Puerto Rican workers for Hawaii's plantation owners from the coffee, sugar and banana fields of Yauco, Arecibo, Adjuntas, and Larres in Puerto Rico, with some recruits drawn from the cities of Mayaguez, Ponce and San Herman. He "drew them a nice picture of life in Hawaii", which later they would discover to be "practically hell on earth", according to UPW refuse worker Adolf Samuels, remembering his folks' experiences.

Recruits were not hard to find in Puerto Rico. In 1891 a smallpox epidemic took a heavy toll. In July, 1898, the U.S. Army invaded Puerto Rico and destroyed many fields, in "liberating" Puerto Rico from the Spanish. Fate was again cruel to the Puerto Rican people when a severe hurricane in 1899 killed several thousand people and destroyed herds and farmlands. Rock-bottom poverty and starvation were the order of the day, and a trip to the "paradise" of Hawaii where jobs were plentiful and some wages could be earned sounded promising.

Adolf's grandfather Jose Soto was among the first Puerto Rican immigrants, coming from Larres. He worked 33 years on a Big Island plantation before he became too sick to work — and then the lunas and owners threw him and grandson Adolph off the plantation and out of their modest housing. He and Adolph came to Honolulu to live, where Adolph brought in most of their income until his grand-



Queenie and Adolf Samuels with their granddaughter Denise.

father's death 4 years later. "He seemed humiliated by what had happened to him, by the way he had been treated, thrown off like some old machine," Adolf adds.

The Puerto Rican workers in the fields developed a reputation for fighting back. They didn't like being pushed around by the lunas or plantation owners. They never formed a Puerto Rican union, but would take matters into their own hands when a luna barged into their home or threatened them.

Puerto Ricans who could read and write were often made lunas to keep them from making trouble. Many others were fired as troublemakers and black-listed from other plantation jobs. They did have citizenship as Americans, and could roam around and look for better jobs, but many ended up in road construction gangs, exploited by road labor contractors like E.E. Black and Dillingham.

And Puerto Rican workers like Brother Adolf Samuels and Sister Queenie Samuels, more conscious of their exploitation and of how they and their parents had been treated and used, played a significant role in the formation of some of the major unions in Hawaii, including the UPW.

Property of
ETHNIC STUDIES LIBRARY,
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII