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Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico is always political

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Lider Restrepo writes from New York City on the political storm that broke out over the honoring of Oscar López Rivera at this year's Puerto Rican Day Parade.

Puerto Rican political prisoner Oscar López Rivera was finally released this March from federal custody after 36 years behind bars—only to find himself at the center of a manufactured controversy that reveals how little has changed in the status of the island he went to jail trying to free.

López Rivera was going to be honored at this year's National Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York City as a National Freedom Hero. Conservatives and police organizations were furious about such an honor being bestowed on a former leading member of the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (FALN), which conducted an armed struggle for Puerto Rican independence in the 1970s.

The right-wing Media Research Center, which falsely calls itself "America's leading media watchdog," [claimed credit for pressuring](#) major media outlets like Univision and corporations like Goya Foods and Coca-Cola from withdrawing their sponsorship of the parade.

Nicole Malliotakis, a Republican state Assembly member, New York City mayoral hopeful [and noted xenophobe](#), held a press conference in front of Fraunces Tavern, where four people were killed by an FALN bombing—one never linked to López Rivera, by the way. [Malliotakis declared that the parade organizers' decision](#) was "equivalent of saying 40 years from now saying it's okay to honor a leader in al-Qaeda, Timothy McVeigh or Ramzi Yousef."

Current Mayor Bill de Blasio seemed to be standing strong in the face of pressure on him to boycott the parade—[until he claimed this week](#) that he had been working behind the scenes to pressure parade organizers to rescind their decision honoring López Rivera.

"It's not for me to dictate to them how to do it," de Blasio said. "I just made clear to them that what was going on wasn't going to work and had to be changed."

In the midst of all the frenzy, López Rivera took the high road. In [an opinion article for the New York Daily News](#), he wrote:

Unfortunately, the narrative around the Parade is not celebration and concern for the situation on the island, but rather misinformation about who I am and what I stand for.

We must shift the focus. We cannot let people who are unfamiliar with Puerto Rican history define the narrative and experiences of our community. I want to repeat what I have said in many interviews, both in prison and since my release. I personally, and we as a community have transcended violence — it's crucial for people to understand that we're not advocating anything that would be a threat to anyone...

I will be on Fifth Avenue not as your honoree but as a humble Puerto Rican and grandfather who at 74 continues to be committed to helping raise awareness about the fiscal, health care and human rights crisis Puerto Rico is facing at this historic juncture.

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López Rivera was the longest-serving Puerto Rican political prisoner in American history. Of his 36 years behind bars, he spent over a decade in solitary confinement. [As Sandy Boyer wrote in SocialistWorker.org](#) two years ago:

The government could never tie López Rivera to any injuries or loss of life suffered from the group's armed struggle. [A 1980 Chicago Tribune editorial](#) noted that FALN operations were "placed and timed as to damage property rather than persons," and that the group was "out to call attention to their cause rather than to shed blood."

U.S. officials resorted to charging López Rivera with seditious conspiracy, which has been used overwhelmingly against Puerto Rican nationalists. By contrast, no member of a right-wing militia has ever been convicted of seditious conspiracy....

López Rivera would be free today if he'd been willing to leave his imprisoned comrades behind. He was offered a pardon in 1999, when Bill Clinton pardoned 13 Puerto Rican political prisoners. He refused it because two of his comrades—Euros [José Alberto Torres and Haydée Beltrán](#)—were excluded. He felt he shouldn't be free while they were still in prison. Since then, they have both been paroled, while López Rivera remains behind bars.

The demonization of López Rivera and his comrades served to obfuscate the far more destructive nature of [the U.S.'s century-long terrorism in Puerto Rico?

<https://socialistworker.org/2015/11/10/how-will-puerto-rico-win-its-freedom>] such as the forced sterilization campaign that left one-third of Puerto Rican women unable to give birth from 1936 to 1968, the Ponce Massacre that killed 19 Puerto Rican nationalists and bystanders, and the radiation experiments performed on an imprisoned Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos, the leading figure of the Puerto Rican independence movement.

[New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo claimed to speak for Puerto Ricans](#) by arguing that honoring López Rivera would detract from the true "purpose of the parade, which is to honor the Puerto Rican community, and honor our connections, and honor their culture."

In fact, López Rivera has broad support on the island—35,000 people marched in San Juan for his release in 2014—and he would have served as a better symbol of hope in the face of the island's prolonged crisis than June 11 happens to be the day of both the parade in New York City and a referendum in Puerto Rico on the island's colonial status.

Puerto Rico Gov. Ricardo Rossello and his New Progressive Party are strongly pro-statehood and are positioning this referendum as a way to alleviate the budget crisis. Many observers believe that Rossello and his allies [used the parade controversy to attack their opponents->

<http://nypost.com/2017/06/01/puerto-rico-to-vote-on-its-status-on-same-day-as-divisive-parade/>" class='spip_out' rel='external'>a bunch of corporate logos next to the Puerto Rican flag

in the lead-up to the vote.

"The statehood party is very much threatened by what this parade represents and what Oscar López Rivera represents," [claimed New York City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito](#). "And so now they're engaging in trying to force companies to withdraw, and making certain threats if they don't do so."

The solutions presented by statehood are limited. The vote is nonbinding and subject to congressional approval. Rossello's pleas to make Puerto Rico the 51st state will likely fall on the deaf ears of a Congress that is currently attempting to dismantle an already scant social safety net in the mainland and has no interest in adding a state in

fiscal crisis.

Puerto Rico has been suffering from the crisis for years. Barack Obama's bipartisan solution to address the debt crisisâ€”PROMESAâ€”has only "promised" more austerity and ruin for ordinary Puerto Ricans.

[An unelected Financial Oversight Board](#) representing the very interests that put Puerto Rico in this terrible position now has authority over the island's governance. Not surprisingly, its recommendations include continued reduction of spending on K-12 and higher education, and health care; the sale of Puerto Rico's public resources, such as its shoreline; and the privatization of public utilities.

The callous handling of Puerto Rico's crisis is the latest episode in a long history of negligence by the U.S. government and plunder by American investors and vulture capitalists. The island's colonial status that Oscar López Rivera dedicated his life to fighting continues to limit its ability to fight this sustained injustice.

Those who claim that the Puerto Rican Day Parade shouldn't have "political" elements are ignoring the eternally political nature of the island's status and the conditions of its people at home and in the diaspora. Until Puerto Rico's colonial question is resolved, any talk of Puerto Rico will necessarily be political. And the parade is one of the most highly visible occasions for these discussions to happen.

Puerto Rico's moment now requires a revival of its history of resistance and struggle for self-determination.

[Tens of thousands of students at the University of Puerto Rico](#) are leading the way with an ongoing strike against cutbacks set forth by Rosello's government that would decimate the University of Puerto Rico system, raising tuition and closing the majority of its 11 campuses. The students are also calling for a national audit of Puerto Rico's debt, a demand that has the support of a majority of Puerto Ricans.

Puerto Ricans of the diaspora need a reason to look at their homeland as something more than a lost cause. Puerto Rican pride must be channeled into action.

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