

THE PROGRESS OF POVERTY: CONFEREES LEARN ABOUT THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

On Thursday morning, June 17th, Georgists from several countries, mostly the United States, gathered in an air-conditioned room in the Hotel Santo Domingo for a "Brief Orientation on the History of the Dominican Republic (1492-1992)." Dr. Fernando Perez Memem underscored the importance of Dominican relations to Haiti, which shares the island of Hispaniola (or *Quisqueya*, as the natives once called it), and to the United States, which cast more than its shadow upon the small struggling Republic.

Hispaniola was colonized by Christopher Columbus, whose brother in 1496 founded Santo Domingo as the first European city in the western hemisphere. African slavery, begun by Columbus to replace the dying native population, continued on Hispaniola until its abolition in 1809. At the time the Spanish colony, which had been ceded to France in 1895, had already been conquered by the forces of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the former African slave who led Haiti, formerly St. Dominique, in its struggle for independence from France. Santo Domingo proclaimed its independence from Haiti on February 27, 1844, under the leadership of Juan Pablo Duarte. A series of military-supported governments and struggles with Haiti and Spain ensued.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the United States exerted an ever-increasing influence over the Republic, whose businessmen had gotten into deep debt financing several wars against Haiti. Between 1916 and 1924, the Dominican-American Conventions legitimized intervention on the part of the US President, who was empowered to pay the Dominicans' debts to various banks in return for one big debt payable by the DR to the US government. One method used was a customs duty on Dominican imports: 55% paid to the US government, 45% to the Dominican government. Civil war broke out, a legitimate condition under the Conventions for US military intervention. This left the DR with a higher debt than before, to pay for US supervised infrastructure, education, and health services. Poverty and unrest continued after the troops withdrew.

One result of the intervention was the rise to power of General Rafael

Leonidas Trujillo Molina, who had been trained in a US/DR military academy. Trujillo's "messianic inclinations", said Dr. Memem, led to his sacrificing freedom to order. He was the first and only Dominican President ever to pay off the national debt in full. Yet, at the time of his assassination in 1961, he had let the debt rise again, to \$11 million. Today the debt has grown to over \$4 billion, "so large as to be unpayable."

The unstable period following Trujillo's death fueled further intervention by a US government that feared a communist takeover inspired by Castro in neighboring Cuba. According to Dr. Memem, there was little basis for such a fear.

Critical of the US over-reaction, the Organization of American States sent in a peace-keeping force to replace US troops. Joaquín Balaguer was inaugurated president on July 1, 1966, and OAS troops had all withdrawn by September 21, 1966.

During the question period, Dr. Memem responded to Bob Clancy and spoke of how in 1850 and 1869 attempts were made by some Dominicans to interest the US government in annexing the Domini-

can Republic into the Union. The US dropped the idea when a study commissioned by President Grant indicated that annexation was sponsored by only a few Dominicans for selfish ends, and was op-

posed by most Dominicans.

On Friday morning, at the conference meeting at the Dominican Central Bank, up-to-date statistics were presented by Lucy Silfa, "World Bank confirms that the poverty levels have been increasing -- 4.6 million classified as poor in this half, which they share with Haiti. 37% are very poor."

Half of all Dominicans now live below the poverty level; another 30% are classified as having unsafe drinking water, Ms. Silfa told us, and went on to say that, in spite of some improvements since 1989, poverty has increased: 24.1% have no access to radio; 34.8% have no access to a refrigerator; 71% have no telephone; 34.9% have no stove; and 83% have no vehicle of their own.

"Logical results of a system that was



initiated in our country five hundred years ago when Christopher Columbus brought men with no mentalities," Lucy commented to the televised session. "We are now Georgists in the Dominican Republic.... In Rio de Janeiro, they said the earth is sick, but it is us, the men and women who are sick, and it is us who have to straighten our minds to cure the illness

in society. It is our duty to change... to apply the correct medicine. Henry George, in his masterwork *Progress and Poverty*, has shown the way."



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