

# **The Crime of El Fanguito**

By William Z. Foster

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Z. Foster, the author of this pamphlet, is National Chairman of the Communist Party and a veteran leader of the American labor movement which he has served for more than fifty years.

Mr. Foster visited Puerto Rico in March of this year, and talked with hundreds of the people about the problems they face. Shocked by the conditions he saw, Mr. Foster wrote this open letter immediately upon his return to the United States. On March 10, he addressed one of the largest meetings of Puerto Rican workers and progressives ever held on the Island. In a theater seating only 1,200, over 2000 people tried to crowd their way in and overflowed into the street.

*Mr. Foster is the author of many books and pamphlets among the latest of which are Labor and the Marshall Plan and The Herald Tribune's 23 Questions about the Communist Party Answered.*

Mr. President:

El Fanguito, as you may know, is located in San Juan, Puerto Rico. It is the worst of the several huge slums festering in the body of the Puerto Rican capital, and it is perhaps the most terrible destitution area in the whole western world. El Fanguito, meaning in English, "The Mudhole," is the very symbol of human misery, exploitation and despair. It is also, no less, the symbol of American colonial domination over Puerto Rico.

Mr. President, I am addressing this letter to you because, as President of the United States, you exercise an almost dictatorial control over Puerto Rico, which is a colony of the United States. You have the power to veto whatever legislation you please of the Insular Legislature, even though it is passed by unanimous action. With your great powers you can also heavily influence the Legislature to pass such laws as you may desire. Moreover, you have control over the expenditure of huge funds in Puerto Rico and can go far toward shaping the economic life of that island. You are, therefore, largely responsible for the continuance, if not the origin, of such slums as El Fanguito.

El Fanguito, together with the other local slums of San Juan, embrace an estimated 75,000 to 100,000 people. This is equal to about one-half of the total population of the capital city itself. These terrifying slums are primarily of American making. The worst of them, the social cancer, El Fanguito, has, with malignant vitality, been rapidly spreading its deadly poison far and wide during the past 15 years. These vast slums are the inevitable result of the ruthless exploitation of Puerto Rico by the American sugar trust, aided by reactionary Washington politicians.

Rexford Tugwell, former Governor of Puerto Rico, had the following to say about the San Juan slums in his book aptly entitled, *The Stricken Land*:

But also what shocked me, as it must any newcomer, or any visitor, who like myself, had not come to San Juan for some years, was the rising tide of slums which seemed about to overwhelm the city. El Fanguito, the shack city over the marshes beside the Martin Pena Channel, had, in 1934, consisted of a few hundred squatters' houses; now we saw it stretching up toward Rio Piedras miles away in a seemingly endless spread of squalor. It had a kind of order

and governance of its own such as a homunculus or some other low form of life has: the shacks were in rows, that is, which left some open space for filth to accumulate, and the tide lifted the piles of garbage and deposited them again, in the same place, twice daily. What a startling failure of all our efforts to outpace, with schemes for housing and public works, the forces of disintegration so powerfully at work on this island. Good lord, I thought, how glad I am that I have no part in *this*.

Let me assure you, Mr. President, that this horror slum, has not lessened any since Mr. Tugwell wrote the above words. It is now bigger and more deadly than ever.

When you were in San Juan a few weeks back, Mr. President, the route to your comfortable hotel in the mountains took you right past one edge of El Fanguito. But you made no personal investigation of the frightful conditions prevailing there. No doubt your yes-men told you that conditions in El Fanguito had been much exaggerated by observers and that, anyway, everything possible was being done to remedy the situation. So you passed on, and in your public speech you cynically told the Puerto Rican people that "Too often we had our attention directed towards Puerto Rico's problems." You also poured forth slick flatteries about the freedom, progress, and prosperity of the Puerto Rican people under American colonial rule. Small wonder, then, that your reception in San Juan was so frigid and that the people gave you such a cold shoulder.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, warm-hearted and generous, would have turned into that vast slum city and listened sympathetically to the desperate stories of the unhappy people there, but Truman did not turn in, nor did he listen. This contrast between the two men explains why the oppressed of the world respect the name of Roosevelt and not that of Truman. Also, your unresponsiveness to the woes of the people is why the workers in the United States are not going to re-elect you to the Presidency next Fall. The big capitalist and militarist interests now dominating Puerto Rico doubtless felt that you acted very "sensibly" about the unpleasant matter of El Fanguito by ignoring it. For, indeed, you are a man who does not grow "sentimental" over the sufferings of poor people, either in Puerto Rico or in the United States.

But, Mr. President, although you as the head of the great imperialist country which holds Puerto Rico as a colony, coldly ignored the grave slum problem of Puerto Rican people by callously riding past El Fanguito, I, as an American citizen conscious of our nation's heavy responsibility to this oppressed people, did not ride past. I went into this most wretched of slums with its immense population and talked to many of its miserable inhabitants. And I saw sights and heard stories of extreme poverty that will stay with me until my dying day. I burned with shame that such outrageous conditions exist on Puerto Rico and are caused by us. The overwhelming misery and squalor of the great slum city can be compared only to the frightful conditions in the slums of the Middle East and of India. A modern Dante, seeking to write a new *Inferno*, need go no further than El Fanguito.

El Fanguito is sprawled out over mosquito-infested, marsh-tide flats. The squatters' houses are thrown together of any material that comes to hand, and the shacks are incredibly over-crowded. Most of the places are unfit for hogs, much less for human beings. The houses have no toilet facilities, and there is no garbage collection. The water supply is entirely inadequate, consisting only of occasional community faucets, contrived by the people themselves. Whole areas are completely dark at night, having no street lights, and many of the people are too poor even to buy kerosene lamps or candles. Most of the inhabitants' homes are also practically destitute of furniture. There are not even streets in the horrible slum, except where the people themselves have carted in soil and rubbish to build up roadways of a sort.

The whole place is an indescribable litter of garbage, tin cans, and other refuse. From it there exudes an all-pervading, sickening stench. But worst of all is the periodic flooding of the place by the filth-laden tide. To escape this disgusting deluge most of the shacks have been set up a foot or two above the ground, but many not so raised are repeatedly flooded by the unspeakable mess. Crazy foot bridges lead from one hovel to another.

Children, mostly naked, with no toys and with no place to play, wade about in the filthy water. At one place we visited, a big city sewer belched its foul contents into an open canal, whence the stinking flood was from time to time swept back into the squatters' village by the rising tide. As we gazed upon this shocking sight two little naked girls about three years old, waded waist deep in the

filthy water pouring from the sewer's mouth. The unfortunate children are growing up mostly untaught and illiterate, along with their other miseries and dangers.

Actual hunger and chronic malnutrition are rampant in El Fanguito. This was all too evident from the pinched faces of the adults and from the rickety condition of the children. And sickness, too, flourished – tuberculosis, hookworm, malaria, bilharzia, and many other diseases bred of poverty, filth, and undernourishment. The most terrible sickness hazard of all, so the people told us, came from their naked children playing in the germ-laden sewage water that periodically overflows the slum area.

One thing that struck me was the unconquerable tendency of the people to make the best of a bad situation, by sharing their meager substance with those who were in even direr distress, by fighting to keep clean under impossibly dirty conditions, by brightening up their hovels with flowers and paint and by their heroically impossible efforts to build a lighting system and a series of streets with their own too slim resources.

And who do you suppose lives in this sinister American community, El Fanguito, Mr. President? Certainly not the robbers and exploiters of the Puerto Rican people; no one would expect that! Peasants and agricultural workers, driven by hunger from the land, and other workers without jobs; they are the slum dwellers. Poorer-paid employed workers also live there. And all this suffering is because of ruthless American colonial exploitation.

When the United States took over Puerto Rico from the Spanish in 1898 there were 60,000 land owners, but now there are less than 5,000. The big American sugar corporations have grabbed the land and are exploiting the people from their offices in New York. Unemployment in Puerto Rico, in the cities and on the land, reaches very high levels, ranging from 40 per cent to 75 per cent in the various categories of workers. This huge jobless rate is because of the one-crop sugar-system, and because of the anti-industrialization policies that American exploiters have fastened upon the island.

Wages in Puerto Rico, Mr. President, under American pressure average only about one-third as high as they do in New York. But living necessities cost fully as much in Puerto Rico as in the United States, while everything of a luxury or semi-luxury character costs very much more. The Puerto Rican workers “solve” their high cost of living problems by subsisting chiefly on rice, beans, and dried

codfish, by living in horrible slum shacks built of waste lumber and sheet iron, by denying themselves and their families proper education, relaxation, and medical attention, and by dying 10 to 15 years before their time. It is these underpaid workers of land and factory, a constant prey to devastating unemployment, who, in the main, fill to overflowing the monstrous slums of El Fanguito.

Of course everybody in Puerto Rico does not live in slums. But, as Mr. Tugwell says, the slums are a national menace, "threatening to overwhelm the city." The gravity of the economic position of the masses of the people in this unhappy country was graphically illustrated a few years ago in a Government report which showed that in a land where the annual minimum budget required for a family was officially stated to be \$1,240, the average yearly income of 86 per cent of the population was only \$345 per family. This serious situation has improved very little, if any, during the war and postwar years since this survey was made.

The people of El Fanguito were amazed to see Americans interesting themselves in their problems. Their conception of Americans, gained by bitter experience, is that of hard-boiled exploiters, living off the miseries of the Puerto Rican people. Their amazement evaporated, however, when they learned that our group was made up of Communist Puerto Ricans and Americans. They crowded around us, eager to tell their tragic stories and to show us their miserable homes.

Typical among the scores whom we interviewed was one worker who had been unemployed for several months. He was penniless, and he had a wife and several children to feed. He told us casually that the children lived by picking up whatever food they could find among their impoverished neighbors. Are you aware, Mr. President, that in Puerto Rico jobless workers like this man receive no unemployment insurance or relief whatsoever? When their work plays out they are thrown out on the streets to live or die, as the case may be. The United States Government which determines the basic laws and economic conditions of the island is definitely responsible for this outrageous situation.

We went to visit another poverty-stricken family who lived in a shack that was more like an outhouse than a home. The father was sick and unemployed. The wife, 28 years old and obviously once a beautiful woman, was lying in a bed of rags and slowly wasting to death of tuberculosis. They had no money, no food, no medical care

of any kind, and, may I add, no hope either. The woman had been refused admission to a hospital – there was no room, they told her. The dying mother’s greatest worry was what would become of her half-starved little children after she had passed away. Our guides, residents of the area, told us later on that when she died the neighbors would simply divide up the children among themselves. What mattered one more hungry mouth in their family flocks? That’s how they solve the orphan problem in the grim democracy of the poor in El Fanguito.

The last place we went to was the most terrible “home” of all. There were 11 children in the family, and the father, obviously far advanced in tuberculosis, had long been out of work. There was no food whatever in the house. I was utterly shocked at the physical condition of the children, who were undernourished to the point of actual starvation. The several smallest ones were particularly horrifying. Pasty-faced and stunted, spindly-legged and pot-bellied and with fever-bright eyes, these little babies seemed unable to smile or even to cry. They just stared at us, bewildered at the strange world that did not give them the milk and other nourishing food that their tiny bodies craved. The mother and grandmother, busying themselves with the crowded, famished children in the bleak little hovel, were the very picture of maternal misery and despair. The breadwinner of this American family (for Puerto Ricans are American citizens, you know, Mr. President) was a 12-year old boy, who earned in San Juan an average of 50 cents per day shining shoes. This stricken family was starving along on a meager diet of white rice, which costs as much per pound in Puerto Rico as in New York.

The workers pressed us to come here and go there, to see ever-new horrors of El Fanguito. But after visiting the tragic family of eleven, I couldn’t take any more of it. I was thoroughly sickened by the sight of babies being murdered by slow starvation, for the sake of American “free enterprise” and capitalist profits. On leaving, I promised the workers in this terrible slum that, as best I could, I would raise my voice in their behalf in the United States.

If such poverty can exist in these postwar boom days in Puerto Rico, one can imagine, then, what frightful conditions there will be in this island when the coming economic crisis hits the United States and ruins Puerto Rico’s market for sugar.

The most terrible of all my experiences in El Fanguito, however, was the workers’ answer to our question as to what could be

done to improve their horrible situation. With one voice the two or three dozen who were there gathered about us declared that most of all the poverty-stricken thousands wanted to be assured of the right to remain in El Fanguito. On this demand they were all united. Food they wanted, and medicine, and water, and lights, and streets, and schools, and especially they wanted a dike to hold back the frightful flood of filth that periodically engulfs them – but most of all, they wanted the right to live in this terrible slum. This shocking demand they made because they were constantly being harassed by threats of the politicians to dispossess them, to drive them out of their slum houses, and to demolish El Fanguito. Eviction would force upon them the even worse fate of being driven back into the country or out onto the streets to starve. El Fanguito, for all its horrors, meant to these poor people at least a roof over their heads, their families' being held together, a community solidarity with others in like misery, and a chance to earn an occasional dollar in the city.

As for myself, I was literally sickened and made speechless listening to these poverty-stricken slum-dwellers, American citizens all, who were plagued by famine, sickness, and every hardship of poverty, and who made it their big demand that they be allowed to live in the hell hole of El Fanguito. What do you think of it, Mr. President? Does it give you a feeling of pride as an American, as the political head of a country which is literally choking in its hoarded wealth?

When I inquired of the inhabitants of this great slum whether the extensive housing project now going on on the outskirts of San Juan would ease their conditions, as many people were claiming, they laughed cynically. They said they were altogether too poor to pay the rents asked for these new places, which would be grabbed up by middle-class elements and the better-paid state functionaries. So the workers of El Fanguito cling to their shanties and hovels as the only real perspective they can see. Obviously, together with other urgent measures of relief, there is a burning necessity in Puerto Rico for broad housing projects at a very low rental, or a free occupancy basis, such as have not yet been undertaken by the Federal or Insular Governments.

The great shame of the United States is that it has not only permitted its capitalists to rob the Puerto Rican people without limits, but it also stubbornly refuses to grant them the most elementary economic and political reforms. Under Governor Tugwell's regime

some efforts were made to introduce some phases of New Deal legislation into Puerto Rico, but even these limited measures were fought as sheer Bolshevism by the Sugar Trust and its many lackeys in Congress.

The only social insurance the Puerto Rican workers got during the New Deal reform period was a \$7.50 per month pension law for a few old workers paid by the Puerto Rican Government. This skin-flint measure the workers spit upon with contempt. It is significant, however, that the American Sugar Kings have no trouble in having the Taft-Hartley slave labor law cover Puerto Rico. But the bulk of the workers, members of the U.G.T., are militantly and successfully opposing its application.

It was quite in line, Mr. President, with American reactionary resistance to the demands of the Puerto Ricans for the most elementary economic and political reforms that you made your cold-hearted statement that "Too often we had our attention directed towards Puerto Rico's problems." That cynical remark should haunt you every time you think of Puerto Rico. Overfed American businessmen and tourists go their ways in the island unconcerned over the Puerto Rican people's woes. And why should they be disturbed in their pleasures? For does not American ruling capitalist class philosophy hold to the brutal principle of free enterprise, that everybody shall fend for himself and let the devil take the hindmost? Since when, then, have we become our brothers' keepers? You, too, Mr. President, were unconcerned about the welfare of the hard-pressed people of Puerto Rico. True to the interests of American imperialism, all you had to offer was a petulant complaint that you had heard more than enough about Puerto Rico's problems. Did not Marie Antoinette reply once in this manner to an impoverished people demanding bread? Remember?

American reactionaries make much of the fact that the Puerto Ricans, after long struggle, were grudgingly granted American citizenship (in 1917) and the right to elect their own Governor (in 1947). But the plain reality is that, hedged about as they are by a colonial type of legal restrictions, the Puerto Rican people now have less political freedom than they had under the Spanish charter of 1897, instituted one year before the American occupation. Our American Declaration of Independence might well have been written to express the complaints and aspirations of Puerto Rico, except that the grievances of the Puerto Rican people are more numerous,

more deep-cutting, and more devastating than were those of the American colonists against King George III.

In defense of Wall Street's war plans of imperialist domination of the world, American reactionaries – tongue in cheek – are expressing very great concern about establishing democracy and prosperity in Greece, Korea, the Balkans, China and many other countries. Why not, then, grant this democracy and prosperity to Puerto Rico, right at our own front doorstep? The *Voice of America* radio is blaring forth to the world about the glories of American capitalism. I suggest, therefore, Mr. President, that the story of Puerto Rico be added to its program.

Puerto Rico, a sub-tropical land of eternal summer, is one of the most beautiful islands in the world. It could be a veritable paradise, but American capitalist exploitation has turned it into a green hell for its people. That's why, in recent years, about 350,000 of its citizens have fled to the United States. This big migration of Puerto Ricans resembles the mass flight of the hunger-driven Irish during the past century to America to escape from British exploitation and tyranny. The inhabitants of El Fanguito, the gigantic slum city, are simply those Puerto Ricans who lack the money to flee from American colonial oppression.

Puerto Rico is one of the many islands in the broad Caribbean area that have been exploited to the point of exhaustion by American, British, French, Dutch, and Canadian imperialism. These robbed countries total altogether some 15,000,000 people. If this vast area is not now seething with such revolutionary liberation movements as are shaking India, China, Burma, Indo-China, and Indonesia, the main reason therefor is that the various Caribbean peoples are separated by wide sea distances and are split up by a diversity of languages and imperialist controls. Certainly, however, their grievances against their imperialist masters are hardly less deep than those of the oppressed people of the Far East.

What American imperialism has done to Puerto Rico it is now trying to do to all of Latin America. This is the significance of the various new measures of policy now in force between the United States and the countries of Central and South America. Thus the forcing of "free trade" upon these countries by the United States will render their weak industries helpless before the powerful American trusts; the according of free access of American capital, on its own terms, for investment in the several countries can only give

Wall Street financial domination in Latin America; the so-called standardization-of-arms agreement means to subject the whole military forces of Latin America to the control of the United States, and the Inter-American “defense” pact of the 21 Republics of the Hemisphere is nothing but a scheme to transform the Latin American countries into puppets of the United States in the war that our warmongers, with you as one of their chief spokesmen, are now organizing against the Soviet Union. With these measures now going into effect, several of the Latin American nations already have left hardly more than a shadow of their national independence. No wonder, as Sumner Welles said in the *New York Herald Tribune* a couple of days ago, that anti-American sentiment is rapidly spreading throughout Latin America. Let El Fanguito, with its oppression and misery, be a warning to the peoples of Latin America of what Wall Street imperialism holds in store for them.

In San Juan the American flag flies serenely above all this unspeakable mass misery, exploitation and slum life that our capitalism has brought to the Puerto Rican people. But I did not see any American flags flying in El Fanguito itself. There, as far and wide in Puerto Rico, the people hate bitterly all aspects of American rule, including you, Mr. President. They hate our bitter exploitation of their country; they hate our dictating to them what laws they shall and shall not enact; they hate our arrogance in forcibly holding their country as a colony; they hate us for compelling them to teach their children in English instead of Spanish; they hate our attempts to force the infamous Jim-Crow system upon their people. In a word, they are demanding national independence. And, Mr. President, they don’t want “liberal colonialism,” “statehood,” or “dominion status,” or vague promises of being granted self-determination some day, such as you made. All these devices they rightly consider as only fancy schemes for continuing American domination.

We Americans, I think, in view of our own revolutionary past, should be able to comprehend and grant this demand for freedom from an oppressed people. And our people would do this if they knew the truth about the Puerto Rican situation. Our holding Puerto Rico by force as a colony – and this is precisely what we are doing – means not only to work grave hardships upon this little nation, but also to violate our own Declaration of Independence and Constitution. It means also to trample upon our best national revolutionary traditions and to repudiate the glib promises of liberation that we

made to the Puerto Rican people when our army conquered their beautiful island half a century ago.

What we should do about this whole Puerto Rican matter, Mr. President, can be said briefly, under three heads. First, there must be unqualified national independence granted to the Puerto Ricans, who are a nation of over 2,000,000 people. Second, we should at once withdraw our military forces from the island, leaving the defense of the Panama Canal to the care of the United Nations. And third, we should make all necessary financial grants to enable the Puerto Rican people to build up an industrial system and a diversified agriculture in the island that will provide them with a developing prosperity. On the third point, let me say that it would be a constructive thing if Congress were to take the \$450,000,000 now being squandered on building up the big Puerto Rican military base and give these funds to the Puerto Rican people as a first installment on the cost of the reconstruction of their economic system. But then, I am very well aware, Mr. President, that neither you nor the reactionary Congress will do voluntarily any of these things. To get them done will be the task of the Puerto Rican people and of the growing labor and progressive movement in the United States. The Communist Party will continue to give its full support to this liberation struggle.

You and your big capitalist friends, Mr. President, are extremely alarmed at the rapid growth of the new democracy and Socialism in many parts of the world. This is not surprising, for your capitalist system, which bred two world wars, fascism, and the world's most terrible economic crisis, all within one generation, is obsolete and is passing off the world's historical stage. Now to put across your imperialist program, you are trying to organize a third world war. Your desperation is to be measured by the fact that under the Truman-Marshall Plan, you are not only promoting civil war in various lands and openly bringing pressure to dictate other countries' elections, but you are now proposing to consider it as a cause for war when nations, such as Czechoslovakia and Italy, freely and by their own internal democratic proceedings, decide to elect Communist leadership for their peoples. You are militarizing our own country and turning it over to the mercy of the worst jingoists and reactionaries. Capitalism's imperialist wars of exploitation have laid the world in ruins, and have forced a billion people into a deepening starvation. All that dying world capitalism has to offer humanity is El Fanguis-

to, the “Mudhole,” on an ever-widening scale. And El Fanguito, the symbol of misery and oppression, the world’s masses will never accept, nor can they be forced to do so, even with all of Wall Street’s money and hypocrisy and bayonets. The tragic significance of Puerto Rico is that it plainly shows American imperialism for what it is, in all its brutal tyranny and exploitation. It is a warning to the democratic world what Wall Street domination would signify.

Your speech on March 17 to the joint session of Congress, Mr. President, was a brazen call for war. Already facing defeat in the Presidential election, you are trying to secure re-election and to defeat the third-party movement by creating a wave of war hysteria and fascist-like reaction. You are deliberately rejecting peaceful relations with the U.S.S.R. Your attempt to turn the whole world into a vast Puerto Rico, exploited by Wall Street, is being defeated by the stubborn resistance of the world’s democratic peoples. Your “blitz-krieg” of atom-bomb diplomacy, aimed at intimidating the democratic world, has failed; your Truman doctrine of cultivating civil war in various countries has suffered shipwreck in Greece and China; your Marshall Plan of dominating Europe by the economic power of the United States is also failing. So now, you and your Wall Street military clique would try to accomplish your imperialist purposes by plunging the world into a new war. But look carefully before you leap, Mr. President. Where Hitler failed Truman will not succeed. The first world war lost one-sixth of the capitalist world to Socialism – the U.S.S.R. The second world war has resulted in turning half of Europe toward building Socialism and has shattered the great imperialist-colonial systems of the Far East. A third world war, such as you are trying to provoke, would culminate in the downfall of world capitalism altogether. The outraged democratic peoples would put a final end to the capitalist system, and start the whole world on the way to Socialism. The great masses, lovers of democracy and defenders of peace are advancing on to higher forms of democracy and to Socialism. And you cannot stop them by imperialist war. You can only speed up the tempo of their forward-march.

Whom the Gods would destroy they first make mad. American capitalism, now in the hands of the warmongers, is in a state of frenzy. War is not inevitable, nevertheless. The great decision for peace or war still rests with the people. But now is the time, before it is too late, when the people must speak out and utterly smash the

imperialists of Wall Street who would extend a Puerto Rico-like slavery all over the world.

Very truly yours,

*Wm. Z. Foster, National Chairman,  
Communist Party U.S.A.*