

President Trump threatens to pull the plug on Puerto Rico

By Rafael Azul
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In 1975, in the midst of the New York City financial crash, the *Daily News* published the famous headline “Ford to New York: Drop Dead!” Its front-page article went on to denounce then-President Gerald Ford’s decision not to bail out New York City.

A similar headline would be appropriate today—“Trump to Puerto Rico: Drop Dead!”—following president Trump’s most recent threats and tweets about the financial and environmental crisis that have mired this island since the twin impacts of Hurricane Irma and particularly Hurricane Maria.

“Puerto Rico survived the Hurricanes, now a financial crisis looms largely of their own making,” he claimed, quoting right-wing television journalist Sharyl Attkisson. He added Thursday morning, in three separate tweets: “A total lack of accountability say the Governor [sic]. Electric and all infrastructures was disaster before hurricanes. Congress to decide how much to spend. ... We cannot keep FEMA, the Military & the First Responders, who have been amazing (under the most difficult circumstances) in P.R. forever!”

Trump’s statements are a brutal response to Puerto Rican Governor Ricardo Rossello’s appeal this week to grant emergency low-interest loans to provide his government with much-needed liquidity. On Wednesday, Rossello also asked the US Congress for \$4.9 billion in to fund the community disaster loan system. Puerto Rico has been shut out of the debt market since its bankruptcy.

Hurricane Maria destroyed the island’s electricity grid, caused the near collapse of telephone and wireless communications, a water and sewage crisis, floods and landslides. Puerto Rico must now deal with a severe health crisis, with a weakened infrastructure of damaged hospitals and clinics.

Water, food, and fuel are rationed in many parts of

the island. According to press reports Thursday, food supplies are running low and the number of meals provided through relief agencies is dwarfed by the need. Absent a massive infusion of aid, the very survival of hundreds of thousands is in question.

Next week will mark a month since Hurricane Maria struck. Six thousand are still living in shelters; only about 17 percent have electricity. Forty percent lack access to clean water. Following his very brief visit to Puerto Rico, Trump requested that Congress free up \$29 billion for Puerto Rico, but \$16 billion were earmarked for payment of the island government’s \$74 billion debt. Wall Street will get more “relief” than the people of Puerto Rico.

While high-ranking military officials, attempted to minimize the impact of Trump’s tweets—chief of Staff John Kelly made his first appearance at a press conference Thursday to declare that troops and first responders would remain in the island until the “job was done”—it is clear that the US government has no inclination to undertake the massive investments required by Puerto Rico.

This was conceded by Press Secretary Sarah Sanders. After reminding her audience that relief operations “will not last forever,” Sanders reaffirmed that Trump and Congress are seeking a “fiscally responsible” way out of this crisis, code words for the further impoverishment of the Puerto Rican working class, and paving the way for a handover of whatever assets are left to Wall Street speculators and vulture funds.

Alongside his attacks on long-term aid to Puerto Rico, Trump decided to not renew his 10-day suspension of the Jones Act, which bars foreign ships from moving cargo between Puerto Rican and US ports, imposing extraordinary shipping costs on the island.

Adding to the catastrophic impact of the hurricanes Irma and Maria, the financial crisis and the refusal of Trump and FEMA to offer sufficient food water and other essentials to Puerto Rico, is a jump in unemployment. In the city of Ponce last week, thousands of workers lined up at the headquarters of the Department of Labor and Human Resources (DLHR).

Many of those that were already unemployed on September 20 have not received their unemployment compensation checks (due to the collapse of mail services), and were there to collect their payments.

However, the majority of those waiting in line were newly unemployed or had had their hours cut. A 26-year-old unemployed worker at a clothing store told the local newspaper, *La Perla* that “we are forced to come because our bosses quickly resort to cutting hours and let the workers be damned.”

The number of applicants for unemployment benefits this week was more than 3,000, compared to 960 in the week before Hurricane Maria. DLRH officials expect this last number to continue growing in the weeks ahead.

In San Juan, Labor Secretary Carlos Saavedra has so far refused to respond to press enquiries about the huge growth in the number of unemployed workers. In Ponce, many businesses and plants remain closed. Those that are in operation in many cases have slashed their hours, including factories in Ponce, Yauco, Juana Díaz, Santa Isabel, Salinas and other southeastern cities.

The DLRH plans to announce 26 weeks of paltry disaster relief checks for the unemployed, with weekly checks averaging \$110.

In response to Thursday’s tweets by Trump, Mayor Carmen Yulin Cruz angrily renamed the “Commander in Chief” as “Hater in Chief,” denouncing Trump for lacking the “moral imperative” to help Puerto Rico. Governor Rossello responded, also via tweet, without mentioning Trump; “US citizens in Puerto Rico demand the help and support our nation’s citizens are entitled to.”

These statements by capitalist politicians are a pale reflection of the anger felt by millions of Puerto Ricans and their families, not only on the island, but throughout the mainland. The politicians’ differences with Trump are mostly tactical, centered on how best to

make workers pay for the financial and environmental crisis in Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, California, Texas, Florida and elsewhere.

Trump’s tweets, his and Congress’s minimal help for Puerto Rico, and their demands that the banks be paid first are a warning that American imperialism has no solution for the crisis in one of its first colonial territories. There must be independent joint struggle of all workers, both in Puerto Rico and the mainland, for a massive effort of reconstruction and social investments for all the victims of the hurricanes of 2017.

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