

Puerto Rico, more than 100 days after Hurricane Maria: The class issues

By Genevieve Leigh
8 January 2018

Over a hundred days have passed since Puerto Rico was hit by Hurricane María, the most powerful storm to make landfall on the island in nearly a century. The prevailing devastation in the US colonial territory is a grim illustration of the attitude of the ruling class, not only to the workers and youth of Puerto Rico, but to those on the US mainland as well: one of complete indifference and contempt.

Every aspect of life for Puerto Ricans has been affected. The ongoing blackout referred to on the island as “apagón” is the longest and largest power outage in modern US history. Downed power lines still litter the streets from Aguadilla to San Juan, while bundles of wires and debris line the sidewalks. Only 55 percent of the island has had power restored, and even these “recovered” areas experience frequent blackouts from the highly unstable electrical grid.

Lack of power means that hundreds of thousands of people are struggling to survive without basic necessities, including running water, refrigeration, washing machines, ovens and internet. In the year 2018, in a territory of the “most advanced” capitalist country in the world, old fashioned washboards are being sold in every corner market.

Thousands of businesses remain closed, many of which will never reopen. With an official unemployment rate of 10.8 percent, nearly 118,000 people are out of work—a number many are predicting will skyrocket as small businesses continue to shut down and ramifications of the recent tax bill take effect.

Areas outside of the wealthy tourist destinations are drowning in garbage. Damage from the hurricane created 6.2 million cubic yards of waste and debris—enough trash to fill about 43 football stadiums with piles of waste eight stories high—overflowing the landfills which were well beyond capacity before the storm hit.

Over 250,000 homes were lost to the storm. An unprecedented flood of foreclosures is expected in the coming months. Thousands of homes and cars were left abandoned by the 200,000 people who have emigrated from the island to the mainland, many taking with them only what they could carry.

Up to 300,000 more are expected to follow. The consequences of this mass emigration will be immense both on the island and the mainland. Already there have been reports of a shortage of maternity doctors for laboring mothers in Puerto Rico; and on the mainland, school systems in areas with high numbers of Puerto Rican refugees are strained for resources to provide for the influx of new students.

As has been the case with every natural disaster in the US from Katrina in 2005, to the string of hurricanes in 2017, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has proven completely incapable of providing even a semblance of adequate relief.

After FEMA food and water finally arrived after weeks of delay due to legal restrictions bound up the island’s colonial status, the distribution process was completely botched. A WSWS reporting team found that nearly everyone on the island had a story about failed FEMA efforts: one worker in Bayamón said that it took over 30 days for the first aid packages to arrive in her town. A waitress in San Juan told our reporters that she stood in lines of 500 people nightly to receive small packages of food, which regularly run out before all those in need are served.

In the midst of the unfolding catastrophe, FEMA granted a newly created Florida company a contract worth more than \$30 million to provide residents with emergency tarps, which quickly became one of the most coveted resources on the island, providing the only protection from the elements for hundreds of thousands of residents who lost their roofs in the storm.

The company, Bronze Star LLC, never delivered those urgently needed supplies, which to this day remain in demand by hurricane victims on the island.

The complete absence of planning for the hurricane and the lack of any significant response to the devastation by the local and federal government has had deadly consequences. Hundreds, if not thousands, of people died needlessly in the weeks and months following the hurricane, in darkened hospital rooms and unpowered homes, unable to receive basic medical treatment.

The recent announcement from Puerto Rico’s Governor Ricardo Rosselló that his administration will now investigate all post-hurricane deaths is an acknowledgement of what can no longer be concealed and everyone on the island already knows, that the scale of fatalities was at least 10 times the number officially claimed.

Exactly how many lives were lost as a result of the incompetent and criminally indifferent response of the Trump administration and both parties will likely never be known.

While the immediate cause of this crisis was a natural phenomenon, the destruction wrought by María during the 72 hours it tore through the island would not have been imaginable without the century of destruction wrought by the US ruling class since its seizure of the island from Spain in 1898.

Natural disasters reveal social inequality and lay bare the class character of society. In the case of Puerto Rico, Hurricane María exposed before the world the extreme poverty and social decay prevailing in what has been described as Washington’s “perfumed colony.”

The semi-colonial status of Puerto Rico has allowed the ruling class to carry out a full scale assault on Puerto Rican workers, leaving the vast majority of the island to live in desperate poverty. In addition to

servicing as a major base of operations for the US military, the island's economy has been driven into the ground in order to provide cheap labor and a tax haven for US-based multinational corporations. Residents of the island cannot vote for president, send only one non-voting delegate to Congress and receive reduced welfare and other federal benefits.

Political life on the island has been dominated by sections of the local ruling class which attempt to channel the legitimate mass anger of workers behind three basic outlets: arguing either to maintain the status quo of the "free associated state," to incorporate Puerto Rico as a US state, or to pursue national independence.

The essential question of Puerto Rico's status, however, like that of the US and every other country, will be decided not in a three-way contest between these factions of the local ruling elite, but rather in a struggle to determine which class will rule the island; whether its economy will be developed to serve the interests of a thin layer of privileged businessmen and the comfortable middle class, or those of the masses of workers and poor.

The struggle of the Puerto Rican workers and oppressed has erupted repeatedly in opposition to both class exploitation and semi-colonial oppression, with mass strikes and protests against privatizations, layoffs and austerity measures, struggles of students against the gutting of public education and the militant protests that forced the US Navy to halt its use of the island of Vieques as a bombing range.

The effort by the local government and the ruling elite in Puerto Rico to cover over this reality of social inequality and class struggle is best expressed in their post-Hurricane Maria slogan "Puerto Rico se levanta" (Puerto Rico rises up) which has been plastered on billboards and businesses in every city and town. Their aim is to obscure the class divisions on the island by promoting a unified Puerto Rican identity.

Contrary to their claims, however, there is, in fact, no single "Puerto Rico." As with the United States and every other country in the world, there is a Puerto Rico of the rich living in air conditioned high rises unmolested by the devastation from the storm, and a Puerto Rico of the working class struggling on the edge of subsistence, without power, without water and drowning in debris and garbage.

As the working class of Puerto Rico was living through this catastrophe with little to no assistance, the US congress was preoccupied with passing a historic tax bill, which will funnel trillions of dollars to the richest layers of society.

And what of the Democratic Party? No demonstrations were called, no new relief funds proposed, no demands made for the cancellation or repudiation of the debt. Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders was dispatched for a brief visit during which he concealed the fact that the brutal austerity measures implemented over the last two years were, in fact, a direct product of Democratic Party policies.

Obama's Financial Oversight Board, a dictatorship of the banks created in 2016 to squeeze the islands' \$70 billion debt out of its impoverished workers, made drastic cuts to education, pensions and social services. Before the storm, the poverty rate stood above 40 percent (twice as high as the poorest US state), the electrical grid was barely functioning, and unemployment was at 10 percent.

The unfolding crisis in Puerto Rico is far from unique. It parallels every other social crime committed against the working class throughout the world: Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana, the Grenfell fire in London, the poisoning of the water in Flint Michigan, the bankruptcy of Detroit. In every instance the response is the same. A pittance is thrown to working people, who are left to die or recover on

their own, while billions of dollars and resources are hoarded by an ever smaller minority. "Natural" disasters are seized upon by banks, corporations and politicians as opportunities to push through new lucrative financial schemes and backroom deals.

The issues brought to the surface by Hurricane María in Puerto Rico are class issues. The fate of the working class of Puerto Rico is the fate of the entire working class, in the United States and internationally. In a country where three billionaires control more wealth than half the population, with a \$700 billion annual military budget used for the destruction of peoples around the world, it is absurd to believe the lies that "nothing more could be done" to provide for an island no larger than the state of Connecticut.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the immediate implementation of a massive public works program to rebuild the island; to ensure that every person has a safe and comfortable home; access to health care, to clean water and to free quality education. We call for the immediate abolition of the debt of Puerto Rico accrued through decades of colonial oppression and parasitic and corrupt financial schemes. We call for the immediate expropriation of the wealth of the financial aristocracy to fund these demands. The productive forces monopolized by the ruling elite around the world must be mobilized and organized to meet social need everywhere, by transforming them into public utilities.

The greatest ally of Puerto Rican workers and youth are their fellow workers in Flint Michigan who have also been denied access to clean water, and those in London who have become refugees in "their own" country after the Grenfell fire, and in Detroit where the working class has suffered the same consequences of a debt crisis they did not create. The solution for all of the problems facing these workers can be achieved only through a unified and conscious political struggle of the international working class against the capitalist system and for socialism.

The fight for a socialist solution to the crisis capitalism has created in Puerto Rico, and for the unification of the struggles of Puerto Rican workers and youth with those of working people all over the planet, requires, above all, the building of a new revolutionary leadership. This means joining and building the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality in Puerto Rico.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>