

A social crime and cover-up exposed

# Five thousand deaths in Puerto Rico from Hurricane Maria

31 May 2018

On Tuesday, a Harvard University **study** was published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* revealing that the true death toll from Hurricane María in Puerto Rico may be as high as 5,000 people, an estimate 70 times the absurdly low official government figure that to this day remains at 64.

The study found that thousands of deaths were caused by lack of access to basic medical care. The report explained: “[T]he most frequently reported problems were an inability to access medications (14.4 percent of households) and the need for respiratory equipment requiring electricity (9.5 percent), but many households also reported problems with closed medical facilities (8.6 percent) or absent doctors (6.1 percent). In the most remote category, 8.8 percent of households reported that they had been unable to reach 911 services by telephone.”

The study also documents some of the daily struggles of life for the working class in the aftermath of the storm. The report shows that, on average, households went 84 days without electricity, 68 days without running water and 41 days without cellular telephone coverage in the period evaluated by the study (September 20 to December 31, 2017).

The results of the study are a damning exposure of one of the most monstrous cover-ups in US history. Eight months after the storm, the independent study by Harvard researchers provides the only comprehensive scientific assessment of the death toll from the hurricane and the massively under-funded and incompetent recovery effort.

The Harvard study notes that the territorial administration of Governor Pedro Rosselló stopped providing official mortality figures to the public in December, after estimates by media outlets showed

vastly higher death rates than the official numbers given out by both the Trump administration and the local government.

This campaign of lies to conceal the scale of the disaster has been led by the Trump administration. During his October 2017 visit, while more than 80 percent of the island was struggling to survive without electricity, running water or access to medical care, the president declared that the destruction from Hurricane María did not constitute “a real catastrophe like Katrina” because the Rosselló government at that point had certified only 16 deaths. It has now been established that the death toll in Puerto Rico towers above that of every other US natural disaster in recent history, including Hurricane Katrina, which is reported to have killed 1,833 people.

The US corporate media are callously indifferent to the suffering of the people of Puerto Rico and determined to continue the cover-up. The Harvard study is being treated as a non-issue. The report was featured on the front pages of the websites of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* for no more than a few hours on Tuesday and was completely gone from the front pages by Wednesday.

The criminally negligent government response to the hurricane was not a mere oversight, but rather a deliberate policy pursued with the support of both political parties. The financial oligarchy that rules the United States did not want to spend the money needed to save lives, make the storm victims whole and rebuild the island’s infrastructure. On the contrary, as far as it was concerned, the social and economic devastation of Puerto Rico was an opportunity to further the corporate plunder of the island’s assets and wealth.

In the months preceding the hurricane, as Puerto Rico

hovered on the edge of bankruptcy, Wall Street hedge funds and banks sought to exploit the crisis to extract ever greater tribute in return for credit. As a result, the island's infrastructure was on the verge of collapse and social inequality was skyrocketing before the hurricane struck.

In the weeks following the hurricane, the ruling elite was centrally preoccupied with passing a multi-trillion dollar tax cut for corporations and the wealthy, which was signed into law by Trump in December, at the same time people in Puerto Rico were dying from lack of electricity, clean water and medical services.

The Democratic Party offered no resistance to the policy of the Trump administration. When Democratic Senator Bernie Sanders visited the island, he proclaimed he had come to "to listen, and to hear from the people of Puerto Rico about how we address the immediate set of crises that the island faces short-term." Following his publicity stunt, no action was taken.

The high point of this scheming is the fiscal plan developed by the unelected and dictatorial Financial Oversight Management Board, put in place by the Obama administration. The proposed plan will eliminate thousands of jobs, privatize both the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA) and the water utility, consolidate dozens of state agencies, cut pensions by 10 to 25 percent for retired public employees, drastically reduce government subsidies to all of Puerto Rico's 78 municipalities, cut funding to the island's only public university, slash sick leave and vacation pay for public-sector workers by half, and eliminate mandatory Christmas bonuses, among other cost-cutting measures.

The crisis in Puerto Rico is a graphic expression of crisis and historical bankruptcy of American and world capitalism. All the processes that have coalesced to produce the disastrous state of affairs in Puerto Rico—the financialization of economic life, privatization of social services, attacks on living standards—are global processes that define life for workers all over the world.

The crimes committed against workers in Puerto Rico parallel 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 supply in Flint, Michigan.

The lie told in every case that there is "no money" to repair the damage, make whole the residents or prepare for a future natural disaster is refuted by record corporate profits and CEO pay and billions spent on war. Just one day after the Harvard report was released, it was revealed that Trump's corporate tax cuts, signed into law a few months after Hurricane María, resulted in \$30 billion in additional profits for America's largest companies in the first quarter. This is the exact cost estimated by Governor Rosselló to repair critical infrastructure on the island.

In early February of this year the Trump administration, with the full support of the Democrats, passed a military budget of \$700 billion which will be used to escalate US military violence in the Middle East and prepare for war against Iran and nuclear-armed Russia and China. This military budget would cover the cost of rebuilding damaged and destroyed homes from the storm 15 times over.

The only way to secure the rights of the working class in Puerto Rico and around the world is by expropriating these resources from the giant corporations and the billionaires who control the world's wealth and putting them under the democratic control of the working class. The ally of the Puerto Rican working class in achieving this is not this or that local bourgeois politician who claims to oppose Trump, but the working class on the mainland and around the world who suffer at the hands of the same ruling class policies.

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