

Puerto Rican resident speaks on death toll cover up, crisis on the island

By Genevieve Leigh
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Jose R. Bellaflores works and lives in Las Marías, Puerto Rico. He is 29 years old and graduated from the University of Puerto Rico (UPR). During his graduation year he was involved in strikes against massive cuts and austerity measures implemented by the Rosselló government against the public university system. After the hurricane he became involved in many community-based efforts to help people recover from the damage.

After visiting a particularly devastated rural region in Las Marías, Jose decided to leave his jobs as a tour guide, volleyball trainer and bartender in the capital to live in the rural community. He began working with a community-based group called “Centro de apoyo mutuo: La olla Comun,” or “Center of Mutual Support: The Common Pot” in English.

The group is located in one of the many abandoned school buildings in Puerto Rico. The community was without power for about six months, only having it restored a month ago. Jose spoke to the WSWS about the recent Harvard study which estimates the real death toll in Puerto Rico since Hurricane María at nearly 5,000.

WSWS: Can you talk about the significance of this new Harvard study estimating the real death toll in Puerto Rico since Hurricane María to be nearly 5,000, and the ongoing cover-up of the death toll?

Jose: Contrasting the official government number of 64 to 5,000 is very sad and I think it is representative of how the government treats the majority of people in Puerto Rico. We on the left, those opposing the status quo, know very well all the ways that the government will lie to us, implement austerity measures, and all the rest.

At first, they [the Rosselló government] said there were only 15 deaths. Once the hurricane passed and we saw the disaster it was very clear that this was not true. Truly we know that in all of our communities more than 15 people died. How could it be the case when entire elderly centers were left abandoned for days and weeks? There were, and

continue to be elderly people with diabetes and other medical conditions without attention living in centers without light, without power!

The number that the Harvard scientists cited is of course much closer to the reality but I think the real number could be much higher.

WSWS: Could you explain a little more about the psychological impact has been on the working class in Puerto Rico and its relation to the death count?

Jose: Consider that we are dealing with a suicide problem that is hard to imagine. And the communities are trying as best as they can to cope and help people but we need resources in order to recover.

Right now, people are just up against the wall and it feels like—not a knife to our throats but more like an AK-47 pointed to our heads. It feels like all we can do each day is to survive. Many people still don’t even have water or electricity. Just thinking that schools are closing one after another, and it’s possible that another hurricane might be coming. They are thinking that my house is not prepared for another disaster and what will I do if something else happens? It’s overwhelming. This is what has led to people dying of suicide and there are many more I believe, who think of taking their lives.

There are tons of stories, horrible stories, of those who suffered needlessly after the storm. I heard one during my work that was powerful about a girl who was stuck in her house with her dead mother for days. She was unable to leave her house to seek help. It wasn’t until the community came to her that she was able to get out.

And there are dozens of stories like this. It is not surprising to hear that the Harvard report found deaths related to medical issues. A lot of people have had a hard time getting medication and they don’t even know if their medicine is good to take. They just take it because it is all they can do.

WSWS: We have made the point many times on the

WSWS that the reason the devastation from the hurricane was able to do so much damage was because of the effect that decades of austerity measures have had on the territory. Could you talk about what the conditions were before the hurricane?

Jose: Puerto Rico had many problems way before Maria. We had a social and economic crisis before the hurricane so you can only imagine what we are dealing with now. The education system is in crisis, our health system is in crisis—the whole system is in crisis. The government had implemented years and years of austerity measures and as a consequence the infrastructure in our country was horrible and collapsing. The damage done from the hurricane was the consequence of these policies.

And now, we don't have jobs, the prices in the market are sky high. I read a report the other day that there are more underground drug spots—something like 1600—than there are public schools! They are attacking education. This is what we are dealing with this. The crime rate is sky high. And what is the government doing? They are taking everything for themselves and a few people are getting really rich. Some money came in and where did it go?

WSWS: Do you think there is any faction of the government that speaks for the people?

Jose: I can't tell you that there is a single one. Yulin Cruz, has been outspoken in the media against Trump and the response of the government but the truth is that she is part of the problem. You cannot say she is for the voice of the people. She is, after all, the mayor of San Juan, the capital city, where there are many problems. And I'm not talking about in Old San Juan where there is money but in the different barrios around it. The two parties fight back and forth but nothing gets done. Right now, I think the voice of the people is in the community. People and the communities are fighting day by day these austerity measures, this corruption. Maybe for the politicians it is a game. But this is not a game for us. We are suffering and we are going to suffer a lot more if we don't build a movement within the communities. We can't sit back and wait for the US government. We saw what the federal government thinks of us. When Trump came and he threw the paper towel roll at the crowd. This is a reflection of the how the whole recovery process has been handled. They threw some power-line poles here and other things there. It was a mess. In rural parts, in particular, there have been landslides. There have been crazy experiences. And they are saying we are prepared for another hurricane season? We are not even close.

We are in a major crisis in Puerto Rico and we are not ready for a new one. And I am talking about a natural disaster let alone the social economic disaster that is coming in the form of an austerity tsunami here in Puerto Rico.

WSWS: What do you see as the way forward for the working class in Puerto Rico?

Jose: How we deal with it is the most important question we have to be asking ourselves. We see that the government has done nothing.

We saw that when the people were left to take care of each other there was amazing solidarity. You can see in the news that people all over the world support us and send help. And we are working in the community to help educate communities and provide what we can but what we need is economic help and psychological help because people are desperate. We can't go back to the way we were living. Those of us who are fighting for a better world will continue to fight even if it takes our lives.

I think there are people in other countries that want to unite to create a new planet. I believe the change has to be international. This is not just a Puerto Rico crisis. This is a world crisis and I think we need to reach out to the people on the mainland and to people around the world for help and resources.

We need to get rid of this government, get rid of this capitalist system. We need to create a whole new life and a whole new system that is just the opposite of what we have today. I consider myself anti-capitalist, anti-war and a socialist. I don't believe in the military.

The crisis of capitalism is immense. Here everything aspect of it has been accelerated. But in some shape or form I have hope. We have to recognize the people who are fighting. We are passing through a lot and understanding a lot. We are talking about fighting against closing of schools, fighting against the effects of the hurricane and the hurricane of the government. We have to channel it to the streets and build a new system and create a new world.

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