

Puerto Rican teachers' anger builds against privatization, firings and lack of pay raises

By Shelley Connor
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Anger is mounting among teachers in Puerto Rico against privatization plans by the government, dwindling enrollment and firings. Teachers are demanding the delivery of promised raises, smaller class sizes and knowledge about where they will be assigned in the new school year.

In an effort to defuse this anger, the Puerto Rico Teachers Federation (FMPR) has announced plans for a one-day strike on August 15. The FMPR cites members' "indignation" and "outrage" with "the government and the Department of Education" in the face of attacks on teachers and students. Teachers will convene Wednesday in San Juan at the Plaza Colon and will march from there to La Forteleza, the governor's office.

In a press release, the FMPR stated, "The public education system, together with its fundamental components, the students and their teachers, have suffered the most brutal attack in history. Secretary of Education Julia Keleher has decreed the closure of some 450 schools in two years and has reduced the number of educators from 31,000 in 2016 to around 22,500 today."

While the Department of Education has justified school closures on the island by pointing to a steep drop in enrollment (from 346,000 enrolled students in May 2017 to an estimated 311,000 this August), "the government is poised to push the creation of dozens of private charter schools, subsidized with public funds," the FMPR release says.

The teachers' grievances are manifold. There have been no pay raises in the past 10 years. Classes are overcrowded. In addition, the teachers association says, hundreds of teachers are starting the school year with no knowledge of where they will be placed. In the past, teachers have been moved from one school to another

with little notice.

Among the teachers' demands are the delivery of raises that were promised by the governor, but which never materialized. Additionally, they demand class sizes no greater than 20, an end to school closures and to moving teachers from one school to another during the school year. One of their most significant demands, however, is that all efforts to privatize Puerto Rico's schools be halted.

The hurricane gave the privatization movement extra impetus in a manner similar to the way that charter school advocates descended upon a post-Katrina New Orleans. Governor Ricardo Rosselló, who has used Hurricane Maria to advocate for the privatization of Puerto Rico's utilities, has come out strongly in favor of charter schools, private school vouchers and other right-wing, anti-public-school initiatives. At the same time, he has mercilessly shut down hundreds of public schools.

Privatization efforts, however, began well before Hurricane Maria. In July 2015, a group of creditors called the Ad Hoc Group met with Puerto Rico's governor to negotiate the island's \$73 billion debt. As the *WSWS* reported then, the Ad Hoc Group's demands included the sale of \$4 billion worth of public assets, bringing in an additional \$1 billion in taxes and slashing social programs, including public education. The Ad Hoc Group took their advice from the Centennial Group, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank that claimed that Puerto Rico's \$8,400 per student allocation—well below the inadequate US average of \$10,667—was too high.

Rosselló's gutting of public education is part of his overarching priorities to bend to the demands of the Trump administration and US hedge-fund managers. He has laid out plans to privatize Puerto Rico's

utilities. Last summer, months before Maria's landfall, he announced plans to sell the island's seaports, among other assets, to private companies.

Hurricane Maria has given Rosselló and his administration ample pretext to pursue these attacks on the working class with renewed vigor. He plans to cut the education department's budget by \$466 million per year by 2023, which he will achieve by "reducing the size of the system." He and Julia Keleher, whom he appointed as secretary of education in 2016, have repeatedly referred to Hurricane Maria—which killed an estimated 5,000 Puerto Ricans—as an "opportunity" to reform education.

What they meant by reform—and just who would benefit from this "opportunity"—was made manifestly clear on November 8, 2017, when the two greeted US Department of Education (USDE) Secretary Betsy DeVos to discuss their plans. DeVos, who has openly supported removing protections for disabled students and legalizing child labor, awarded the pair for their loyalty to US financial interests with a \$2 million grant from the USDE.

Keleher represents a particularly malignant phenomenon in education in her own right. When Rosselló appointed her to her post in 2016, she had no background in education but as a business consultant. Upon her appointment, she signed a contract with the Puerto Rican government for \$20,000 a month. By contrast, the average monthly teacher's salary sits at a mere \$2,325.

As the calls for further attacks upon education have gained traction, so too has the anger of Puerto Rico's teachers. In November 2017, 21 teachers were arrested for protesting in San Juan. In March, some 16,000 teachers walked out in protest of the privatization schemes. Keleher's extravagant salary was a prominent complaint, as were Rosselló's privatization schemes. Gathered in front of the capitol, they chanted, "Julia, go home!" and, "Ricky isn't here, he's selling what's left of the country."

On August 10, the Puerto Rican Supreme Court deemed Keleher and Rossello's "reforms" constitutional. This ruling overturns a previous ruling by a Superior Court Judge who declared the privatization plans unconstitutional.

Puerto Rico's privatization plans plainly demonstrate the contempt for Puerto Rico's workers by the US and

Puerto Rican ruling class. DeVos announced in July that the Puerto Rico Department of Education would be the first in the US to pilot "new flexibility under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to create a student-centered funding system." The federal department's press release added that the model is designed to "equitably allocate local, state and federal resources based on student needs."

Hedge fund managers such as those with the Ad Hoc Group, "business consultants" such as Julia Keleher, and shameless vulture Betsy DeVos all hover around the wreckage left by Hurricane Maria. That disaster, along with Puerto Rico's \$73 billion debt and its 10-year recession, have claimed the lives of thousands of Puerto Ricans. Yet to DeVos, Keleher, Rosselló, et al., those losses are nothing more than an "opportunity."

That students' needs are being put first by Devos and Rosselló is a sham designed to justify privatization and attacks on teachers' conditions and rights. Teachers should have no illusions that a one-day strike will do anything to fight this assault. Teachers should unite with public-sector and other workers and fight for the establishment of rank-and-file committees that take control of their struggle out of the hands of the trade unions—which accept in principle the budget cuts in the wake of Maria—and fight for a policy based on social need, not profit.

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