

Anger mounts in Puerto Rico as workers discover warehouse full of unused aid

By Genevieve Leigh
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In the aftermath of nearly a month of relentless earthquakes and aftershocks, the island of Puerto Rico continues to reel from the devastation. Thousands of homes and buildings have been destroyed or severely damaged.

Facing the threat of further quakes on top of constant aftershocks, thousands of families have taken to the streets, living in makeshift tents or in their cars, out of fear that their houses will collapse on top of them. At least 7,000 people are reported as living in shelters throughout the island due to the quakes and thousands more remain without power and running water.

Amid these dire circumstances, there is a widespread understanding among workers and youth that local politicians and the US government will be of little to no help. On Saturday, in Ponce, the second largest city on the island which was near the epicenter of the quakes, residents discovered a warehouse piled high with water, cots, propane tanks, medical supplies, baby food and other desperately needed unused emergency supplies that the government had failed to dispense to the community.

The discovery of the supplies set off a social media uproar after a video went viral of a group of residents breaking into the warehouse to retrieve the goods.

As the discovery of the warehouse demonstrates, the response from the local and federal government to the catastrophe continues to be abysmal. Many residents have expressed a horrifying sense of *déjà vu* over the last month of earthquakes, which takes place only three years after Hurricane María hit the island in 2017. The negligent response from the government in the aftermath of the hurricane led to the deaths of an estimated 7,000 people, a fact that the government sought to cover up and deny for more than a year.

In fact, many reports are now suggesting that the

supplies found in the warehouse in Ponce on Saturday have been stored away since Hurricane Maria in 2017. It is unclear how or why the supplies never reached those in need.

While the government response to the life-threatening conditions has been slow, the response from Governor Wanda Vázquez to the eruption of anger over the video was remarkably prompt, though wildly insufficient. Vázquez fired the director of the island's emergency management agency, Carlos Acevedo, only hours after the video was released on Saturday in an attempt to quell the eruption of mass unrest. Two more officials were fired on Sunday, Housing Secretary Fernando Gil and Department of Family Secretary Glorimar Andújar. Vázquez was installed last August after mass demonstrations involving up to 1 million people forced the resignation of two governors.

The governor nominated José Reyes, who oversees the National Guard in Puerto Rico, to be the new commissioner for the State Bureau for Emergency Management and Disaster Management. Under the pretense of “emergency relief,” Vázquez is laying the basis for a police state in preparation for another wave of massive social unrest. So far, 8,500 National Guard troops have been deployed and all local police have been called back to duty from vacations. Washington is in the process of sending 300 security officials from special task forces and Vázquez signed an executive decree last week so that the latter are immediately sworn in as “agents of peace,” with special enforcement powers. The local legislature has also requested the federal government deploy Special Forces from the US military.

There is immense anger among the working class both on and off the island toward local and federal politicians alike. Over the last decade, and the past

three years since Hurricane María in particular, the working class in Puerto Rico has passed through incredible political experiences: the imposition of the dictatorial Obama-era Financial Oversight Management Board, which has imposed savage austerity measures; the systematic destruction of public education, including the closing of hundreds of schools; the state-sponsored cover-up of the death toll from Hurricane María; and, perhaps most importantly, the overthrow of two governors as a result of mass protests involving more than a third of the island's entire population. The grievances of the Puerto Rican people are deeply rooted in these experiences, along with over a century of semi-colonial exploitation of the island by US imperialism.

The level of trust in local and federal politicians is undoubtedly at a record low. Among the hundreds of comments posted on the viral warehouse video one read, "I'm sure the governor of Puerto Rico knew about this. I'm sure she's using the director of the island's emergency management as a scapegoat. They were holding aid for political reasons. People need to go to jail. All these Democrats have no consequences for their actions, so why stop breaking the law. So many corrupt democrats." Another wrote, "This happened last time as well. Was there any investigation and consequences then??"

Someone else ridiculed Vázquez's firings as a stunt. "That guy involved only got sacked. So easy, no consequences. He should be charged and put behind bars for a long time. What he did is tantamount to murder, obstructing the survival of life's needy victims."

Another commenter asked why such tragedies are so frequent. Answering her own question, she replied, "Because the rich don't care, that's why. The poor people suffer and it doesn't matter what party is in charge."

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