

Puerto Rican students occupy four universities

Alphonso Santana, Rafael Azul
28 April 2010

Students have occupied Puerto Rico's largest university, the University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras, in a suburb of San Juan. The protest is against Certification 98, a government decree, which cuts \$100 million from the university budget and eliminates tuition waivers for some students. The student strikers are also demanding no increases in tuition or privatization of services.

The cuts are part of the draconian austerity policies imposed by Governor Luis Fortuño on behalf of Wall Street, which included the sacking of 30,000 public sector workers in 2009.

On Monday the governor announced plans for 10 percent across-the-board cuts in the island's budget this year. During his speech Fortuño boasted that the deficit had been reduced from 45 percent of the budget to 12 percent in less than two years. The new budget will be \$2 billion less than the \$11.25 billion in annual spending for fiscal 2009.

His program of fiscal austerity, Fortuño said, had been welcomed by Wall Street credit ratings agencies. "Nobody speaks clearer than the market," he said, pointing to Moody's Investors Service decision last week to raise Puerto Rico's credit rating three notches to A3 from Baa3, one notch above junk bond status.

The governor also lectured students on the \$726 each taxpayer paid for university services, saying cutbacks were needed to lower taxes. In reality the governor's program of "fiscal discipline" is exacerbating the recession in Puerto Rico where the official unemployment currently stands at 16.2 percent. At the same time tuition increases threaten to push out thousands of students from the UPR system, which historically provided the only affordable education for students from working class and lower middle class families.

On April 26 striking students and their supporters rallied at the university to protest Fortuño's budget speech. Among the protesters were representatives of the university's non-teaching employees, faculty members from the Puerto Rican Association of Professors and student organizations. The strike enjoys support from wide layers of working people on the island. Several artists also extended support and will perform in front of the campus Wednesday.

Roberto Caéz, one of the strikers, was quoted in the PR *Daily Sun* as saying, "support has been growing from the beginning. At first we thought we would starve to death, but that was not so. So many people have brought us food... we expect the support to continue growing so the administration will pay attention."

On April 13, a general assembly of students first approved a 48-hour protest and offered to negotiate with UPR President José de la Torre. De la Torre refused to show up Monday and Tuesday, so the students launched a strike and occupied campus facilities.

The action quickly led to a confrontation with university police who attempted to prevent strikers from entering the campus. Using claims of "student violence" as a pretext, university authorities responded by shutting down the university. On Monday, student occupations continued at four of the eleven campuses of the 61,000-student system, including Ponce, Utuado, Arecibo and Rio Piedras.

Rio Piedras Rector Ana Guadalupe has demanded a court injunction against the strikers, which would create conditions for the state police to enter the campus, violating the autonomous character of the university. In the 1960s and 1970s police were involved in several killings of students at the campus, which was

the center of social and political protests.

The Fortuño administration also intervened in the courts to oppose legal action by students against police and government officials for authorizing excessive force against the students.

The students have declared that they will maintain their occupation until university authorities agree to negotiate budget cuts, which in their opinion will greatly reduce the quality of education and prevent many students from obtaining the necessary financial aid to continue their studies.

Students issued an open letter to people of Puerto Rico denouncing their being silenced by the government and university administration. In the letter, students attempt to describe the nature of the crisis of education:

“The University is a reflection of the reality faced by the whole nation. We denounce the deterioration of your living standards and educational conditions due to bad administration, squandering and corruption.”

The politics of the student movement are still undeveloped and influenced in many ways by political forces and trade unions, which accept in principle that working people must accept austerity measures to pay off their loans to Wall Street.

In truth the attack on education goes far beyond bad administration and corruption. Fortuño is the front man for international financial houses, which are demanding cuts in education and living standards from Greece, to Portugal to the US. Students might fight to mobilize the working class throughout Puerto Rico on the basis of a new, socialist program that places the needs of the working class before those of the financial elite. We urge students in Puerto Rico to join the International Students for Social Equality to fight for this perspective.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact