University of Puerto Rico students protest austerity measures

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On Saturday May 13, students from the Río Piedras Campus of the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) marched in San Juan to denounce the government's austerity measures and attempts to criminalize their protests. A student strike at the main campus of the island's university system has entered its fifth week.

Anger is growing throughout the US territory after the May 3 declaration of bankruptcy by Governor Ricardo Roselló and proposals by the Fiscal Control Board (JCF) for sweeping attacks on pensions, public sector jobs and social services to pay the island's creditors, which include major Wall Street hedge funds. This was followed by the May 5 announcement that 179 public schools would be closed, forcing the relocation of nearly 30,000 students and layoff of 2,000 teachers.

The UPR students, many of them dressed in red to symbolize their anger, marched behind a banner that demanded Roselló put his "own criminals" on trial. This was a reference to the arbitrary arrest of protesting students on April 17 and May Day while corrupt government officials who colluded with the banks have gotten away scot-free. Other signs read, "No more budget cuts," "Not 4 Sale the University of Puerto Rico."

Along the march, many pedestrians, including tourists in the Coronado beach district, voiced their support for the students. "We want to awaken their interest; for them to seek out information on what is going on," declared a spokesperson for *Movimiento Estudiantil* (Student Movement), which organized the march.

On Thursday May 11, scores of students occupying the campus in the San Juan borough of Río Piedras defied a court order mandating the reopening of the blocked gates of the institution, which serves 18,000 students.

The students have denounced the court order as an "invitation" to suppress their protest. Pickets circulated in front of the gates leading into the UPR, as police helicopters circled above. "How much more are they going to cut?" declared some of the pickets.

So far, university authorities have declined sending in the police against the students, who are supported by many professors, university employees refusing to cross the student picket line, and the public, many of whom are donating food, water and other supplies to the students inside. The court of appeals is considering bringing charges against the UPR administrators for not repressing the student occupation and ending the strike.

In addition to Río Piedras, students are on strike at the Bayamón campus, south of San Juan. Last week the US Department of Education declared the UPR Carolina campus ineligible for financial aid because of the "paralysis of education," according to governing board chairman Carlos Perez, even though students decided to lift their strike at the Bayamón campus.

Perez, interviewed by the English language *San Juan Daily Star*, declared that the same measures would also be taken against other striking institutions. According to the *Daily Star*, this is "the worst crisis the island's main public university has experienced in its history."

The latest plan the Fiscal Control Board (JCF) is mandating for the US territory includes yearly budget cuts of $7 billion (10 percent), slashing working hours and pensions, and forcing workers to take unpaid furloughs. It also includes a $450 million budget cut by 2025 for the University of Puerto Rico. This was coupled with a yearly debt service of $3.5 billion.

Governor Roselló has called on the public to help UPR by donating loose change in collection boxes at stores where they shop. Several UPR administrators resigned in protests when the cuts were announced in

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February.

The cuts will lead to higher tuition and fees at UPR, postponing building maintenance, the cancellation of classes, and mass layoffs of education workers and maintenance personnel. The Río Piedras campus faces an infrastructure crisis, including the need to replace an aging air conditioning system and many building repairs.

The slashing of funding to the University of Puerto Rico system will also have a devastating impact on the social services UPR provides outside of its walls. This includes health services through a network of hospitals, technical support to agriculture, and earthquake and infrastructure projects. These benefit hundreds of thousands beyond the 60,000 students at the UPR campuses.

Movimiento Estudiantil is asking to meet and negotiate with the Financial Control Board, which students correctly point out only represents the banks and hedge funds. They are asking the board to accept one of various proposals to pay down the debt, including increasing property taxes on expensive homes or taxing the profits of US-owned businesses in Puerto Rico.

The idea that the Puerto Rican population can negotiate with or pressure the Wall Street banks and their political front men to carry out more humane debt payments is politically naïve at best. Roselló—a Clinton delegate at the Democratic National Convention—is a tool of the banks and is preparing to use state repression against popular opposition, while collaborating with the trade unions to contain and crush social anger.

Last week, José Carrión III, the head of the Financial Control Board, voiced his concern over the UPR's refusal, so far, to end the occupation of the University by force. At a meeting of engineers Carrión, a wealthy insurance CEO and bankruptcy specialist, shed crocodile tears over UPR's finances. "All the members of the JSF board are worried and saddened by what goes on at UPR," he claimed, while making it clear the financial assault on UPR is "nonnegotiable," as are all the austerity measures mandated by JSF. With the official declaration of Puerto Rican bankruptcy Carrión and others insist the strike and occupation of the university is the work of a minority of students who are infringing on the rights of the majority that supposedly welcome the brutal financial restructuring.

The student strike was approved by majorities in two student assemblies and is an expression, still in an initial form, of far broader popular sentiment against austerity, which is centered in the working class. The financial control board, on the other hand, is made up of an unelected group of eight representatives of the banks, insurance companies and Wall Street vulture hedge funds who are accountable to no one except the financial aristocracy.

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