

Hurricane Irma slams into Puerto Rico and other Caribbean islands

Jerry White
7 September 2017

Less than two weeks after Hurricane Harvey hit Texas, leading to record flooding and damage in Houston and other areas of the state, an even more powerful hurricane has plowed through a chain of small islands in the northern Caribbean and Puerto Rico and is heading towards the Dominican Republic, Haiti, the Bahamas and Cuba. Densely populated south Florida, which includes Miami, could be hit Sunday, and the Georgia and South Carolina border by Monday afternoon.

Hurricane Irma is a Category 5 storm with 185 mile per hour winds, making it the most powerful Atlantic Ocean hurricane ever measured. In the early morning hours on Wednesday, Irma smashed into the Lesser Antilles islands of Antigua and Barbuda (population 82,000 and 1,700), Saint Barthélemy (9,000), Anguilla (15,000) and Saint Martin/Sint Maarten (77,000).

At least seven people are confirmed dead, though this number is expected to rise quickly.

The eye of the hurricane passed directly over the island of Barbuda around 2 a.m. Wednesday, with reports of sustained winds of 118 mph, gusting to 155 mph, before meteorological instruments failed. Charles Fernandez, minister of foreign affairs and international trade for Antigua and Barbuda, said the destruction on Barbuda was “upwards of 90 percent.”

High winds and storm surges destroyed government buildings, tore roofs from houses and left islands without power or communication. Both the Dutch and the British dispatched naval ships and military personnel to their island possessions, while French President Emmanuel Macron, who was monitoring conditions in the French West Indies from an Interior Ministry crisis center in Paris, said the “toll would be harsh and cruel.”

Hurricane Irma began battering the US territory of Puerto Rico, with a population of 3.4 million US citizens, Wednesday afternoon. As of this writing, the eye of Hurricane Irma was 35 miles (56 kilometers) north of the capital city of San Juan and hovering above the Atlantic Ocean. Authorities say wind gusts of up to 100 mph (160

km/h) could hit the capital of 355,000 people.

More than one million people, or nearly a third of the population, are currently without power, and nearly 50,000 are without water. Fourteen hospitals are using generators after losing power, and trees and light posts are strewn across many roads.

The island has not been hit by a Category 5 hurricane since Hurricane San Felipe in 1928. Hurricane Hugo in 1989 struck Puerto Rico as a Category 4 storm, leaving 72 dead and doing \$3 billion in damage. The National Weather Service predicts “extreme” danger and warns that roads are likely to become impassible, and structurally sound buildings are likely to be damaged. Rock and mudslides, particularly in rural areas, are also predicted.

Harvey and Irma are being followed by tropical storms Jose and Katia, which could develop into hurricanes threatening the northern Leeward Islands in the West Indies—including some of the same islands hit Wednesday—and Mexico, respectively.

The water in the Caribbean is warmer than usual, and this provides fuel for such hurricanes. The intensity of the storms and their frequency only underscore the impact of global warming, which is denied by President Donald Trump and only paid lip service by other capitalist governments around the world.

In response to Hurricane Irma, Trump has declared states of emergency in Florida, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands and ordered the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to begin relief efforts. Puerto Rican Governor Ricardo Rosselló announced that the government was operating 456 shelters to accommodate 63,229 people.

As in Houston, however, the human cost of the new hurricane has been far worsened by the lack of any serious government preparations and the decay of physical and social infrastructure. In the case of Puerto Rico, the island and its people have been left ever more vulnerable by the looting operation carried out by Wall Street to extract some \$70 billion in debt payments, or \$12,000 from each resident of the island.

Last May, a financial oversight board appointed by the Obama administration filed for Title III bankruptcy to pave the way for Greek-style austerity measures, including slashing public-sector jobs and pensions on an island that already suffers from an official poverty rate of 45 percent and 14.2 percent jobless rate. The Puerto Rican government has hired advisors who oversaw the bankruptcy of Detroit and the sell-off of public assets to pay off wealthy bondholders.

The budget proposed by Rosselló cuts the departments of education, natural resources, housing and agriculture, including a \$200 million cut for Puerto Rico's public university that provoked a two-month-long student strike. The budget also eliminates millions of dollars in annual subsidies to 78 municipalities of Puerto Rico, forcing the mayors to find funding in other areas.

The flooding of water and sewerage systems by the hurricane threatens to create a humanitarian disaster on an island that is already supplied with water from systems that violate the US Safe Drinking Water Act, due to contaminants ranging from lead to coliform bacteria. The water system has been privatized twice, resulting in skyrocketing utility bills.

Before the hurricane hit, Ricardo Ramos Rodríguez, the executive director of the Puerto Rico Power Authority, warned that the island's electrical system was vulnerable to a catastrophic failure from high winds because it had not been adequately maintained for years. "If we are [slammed] by this hurricane as is being outlined in the forecasts, there are certainly going to be blackouts, and certainly there will be areas that are going to spend three, four months without electricity service," Rodríguez said in a radio interview with WIPR.

"For many years there has been no maintenance or replacement of damaged equipment," he said, adding that the public corporation has lost about 5,000 employees in recent years, of which 86 percent were operational—linemen, plant operators or mechanics.

The power company, which is saddled with \$9 billion in debt, has been a prime target for privatization by Citigroup and other vulture capitalists squeezing the lifeblood out of the island's people.

On Wednesday evening, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Carmen Merrill, a retired New York City sanitation worker who was born in Puerto Rico and now lives in the southeast of the island. As the interview was conducted, the electricity was cut off in the home in Guayama she was sheltering in with a friend.

"My concern is how long we will be without power. There was a news segment on television a while ago and they interviewed retired workers from the Palo Seco Power Plant

in Cataño, just outside of San Juan. They said any winds above 50 miles per hour could shut the plant because maintenance never got done. A worker who complained that the plant was too dangerous was killed in an explosion. The government is not doing anything about it.

"They use the word 'Commonwealth,' but businesses come here and get tax breaks, and that money is not available for public services. The schools are not maintained and politicians like Rosselló just talk and take no action."

Most Puerto Ricans, she said, could not afford emergency generators. And while many homes were built with concrete to resist storms, low-income families in isolated areas and in neighborhoods like La Perla in Old San Juan live in structures that are susceptible to massive damage.

"The rising of the rivers is the most dangerous," Carmen said. Like Houston, she said, working-class residents were helping each other put metal racks on their windows to protect their homes. "We saw what happened in Houston. It was devastating. We had a small group of people volunteering from Puerto Rico to help rescue people in Houston. People are asking here how a modern state like Texas could flood so quickly and people get washed away in unsanitary water."

Before retiring to Puerto Rico, Carmen said, she was involved in the clean up of Superstorm Sandy in New York City in 2012. "The worst was in Rockaway in Queens, where we saw all the furniture and belongings destroyed and piled up in front of their homes. Houston reminded me of Sandy. Every house and car was flooded. An older lady came up in tears, saying, 'I don't care about the furniture but I want my family pictures.' I found a black and white photo of her grandchildren and gave it to her. After that I couldn't work, I just cried."



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact