

Puerto Rico confronts the devastation wrought by hurricanes and Wall Street

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Already reeling from a bankruptcy crisis and demands of Wall Street for debt repayments, Puerto Rican society has now been devastated by hurricanes Irma and Maria.

Saturday began in San Juan with rising temperatures—a heat wave is predicted. Desperate patients and their families in the crowded emergency room of the Río Piedras Medical Center complained of the failure of the air conditioning system. Some of them were interviewed by San Juan's *El Nuevo Día* newspaper.

"I got here yesterday" said Edna Torres, whose husband was injured by a telephone cable that came down as he was helping clean up in the El Coco community in the city of Salinas, in the south coast of Puerto Rico over 40 miles away from the medical center; "there were lots of people that had no air". She appealed to family members, who brought in a fan to cool her husband's space in the hospital.

Frances Gonzalez brought her husband, who suffered a head injury and internal bleeding from falling while cleaning the roof of their home, to this emergency room from Ponce, 70 miles away said; "he suffered a blow to his head. Now we are here among many many patients, and with no air conditioning".

Jesus Velez, spokesperson for the Puerto Rican Medical Services Administration (ASEM) reported that this emergency room is serving 160 patients daily, up from 15 to 20 on the night of the storm. "We have attended all kinds of conditions, cut hands, falls, broken bones, everything," declared Velez. Many of these patients are forced to travel long distances by their own means.

Every hospital and clinic is taxed to its limit. Jose Sanchez Gonzalez, mayor of the city of Manati (pop. 45,000), west of San Juan, spoke in tears about the island's water shortage: "Hysteria is starting to spread.

The hospital is about to collapse. It's at capacity; we need someone to help us immediately."

That so many were injured while helping their community and neighbors is an indication of the efforts and sacrifices of workers and youth in the aftermath of this storm. These efforts and the solidarity of Puerto Ricans and other workers living in the US stands in marked contrast to the indifference and criminal negligence of the corporate elites.

The Financial Oversight and Management Board, appointed in 2016 by the Obama administration to impose a bankers' dictatorship over Puerto Rico's budget, just announced that it will authorize a maximum of one billion dollars—barely one tenth of the island's approved debt-driven budget—to be used for hurricane response, a pittance, taking into account that preliminary estimates put the cost of the hurricane's destruction at over \$30 billion.

Beyond being a natural disaster, Hurricane Maria is a social one. It devastated and flooded every Puerto Rican city, its electrical system, farms, industries and road network.

That all these damages, and those caused by Hurricane Irma, had been predicted is an indictment of the criminal system of capitalism that puts private property and profits ahead of human needs.

Also scientifically predicted is the growing frequency and intensity of hurricanes across the globe. They are affected by climate change which produces rising sea temperatures, caused by greenhouse gases in the atmosphere derived from industrial activity. The solution to this critical problem continues to be ignored by bourgeois governments around the world, because it interferes with the drive for profits.

This violent storm ravaged a Puerto Rico that was already suffering the assault of Wall Street. Puerto Rico

has defaulted on \$74 billion in public debt. Its publicly owned electric utility (AEE), starved for funds for many years, was forced to default on a debt of \$9 billion. The collapse of the electricity system was in fact widely anticipated by political leaders as the storm was approaching.

It is not just electricity that is in short supply, but fuel, food, water and other basic necessities of life.

Public schools are shut down, as are many factories and places of business. With no electricity, no jobs, hospitals and clinics stretched to their maximum, Puerto Rico is being rapidly pushed back to the conditions of the nineteenth century.

The social fallout of Hurricane Maria and the indifference of the US and local financial aristocracies is bound up with the island's fiscal bankruptcy, the subordination and looting of the Puerto Rican economy by Wall Street's hedge and vulture funds and the economic slump and growing social inequality that make it impossible for many Puerto Ricans to find decent jobs, healthcare and education.

On Saturday, Puerto Rico's governor, Ricardo Rosselló, participated in the distribution of an initial shipment of emergency supplies sent in by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA): one million quarts of water, half a million meals, four thousand cots, and 31 gas-powered generators.

Such a shipment represents little more than a small hand-out, spare change, a humiliation really, relative to the enormous needs.

Puerto Rico was occupied by the United States in 1898 during the Spanish-American War and transformed into a US colony. Following World War II and both in the context of the Cold War and violent resistance by Puerto Ricans themselves to US rule, part of the global wave of independence movements, US imperialism allowed limited autonomy to Puerto Rico in the early 1950s. It attempted to transform its "perfumed colony" into a showcase of "benefits" of US imperialism by providing tax exemptions to US corporations in order to take advantage of the island's low wages.

By 1996, when the tax exemptions were eliminated, and as cheaper labor platforms became available in Asia and elsewhere, there were over 150,000 industrial jobs on the island, mostly in petrochemical and drug industries. By 2010, after companies fled Puerto Rico,

that number had been cut in half, feeding an exodus of Puerto Rican workers for the mainland United States.

At the same time, Wall Street investors funded succeeding Puerto Rican administrations with mountains of tax-free debt. Under conditions in which the Puerto Rican people bore all the risks and an increasing tax burden, hedge funds and Wall Street financiers reaped the benefits.

Weakened economically, with a decaying infrastructure and subject to the financial dictates of US imperialism, Puerto Rico was left open to the impact of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, and to the usurious demands of Wall Street racketeers.

What is urgent now is a massive public works program to reconstruct the island. For this, what is required is the repudiation of the debt to Wall Street, the abolition of the Financial Supervision and Management Board and the expropriation of the wealth of the financial oligarchy to meet the desperate needs of working people.

This cannot be accomplished by an isolated Puerto Rico. It demands the independent and united mobilization of Puerto Rican and US workers—who face the same enemy and the same attack on social conditions—armed with a socialist program



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