Trump to devastated Puerto Rico: Wall Street must be paid!

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The US colonial territory of Puerto Rico has been devastated by a disaster that has left its population of 3.5 million in the midst of a full-blown humanitarian catastrophe.

Much of the island looks like it was hit by an atomic bomb. The already fragile electrical grid has been largely destroyed, leaving millions literally in the dark and without power for air-conditioning or even fans, as Puerto Rico faces 90-degree temperatures and high humidity.

While the official death toll stands at 16, there are no doubt many more fatalities that have gone uncounted, and the threat is that far more people, particularly among the elderly and the sick, some of them trapped in high-rise apartment buildings or small villages cut off from relief, will lose their lives.

San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulin Cruz told the media, "What's out there is total devastation. Total annihilation. People literally gasping for air" in the merciless heat. She spoke of people being taken from their homes in "near-death conditions," including dialysis patients unable to get treatment and people whose oxygen tanks had run out.

At least 60 percent of the population lacks access to clean water, and food is in short supply. Hospitals report that they are within days of running out of medicine, essential supplies and fuel to run generators. Garbage is going uncollected, while many streets are still flooded. Conditions are growing for the spread of deadly diseases, including cholera.

At least 15,000 people have taken refuge in shelters, while many tens, if not hundreds, of thousands more are camping out in homes left in shambles and without roofs by Maria's 155-mile-an-hour winds. Meanwhile, some 70,000 Puerto Ricans are still in danger from a possible failure of the Guajataca dam, which would wipe out entire towns and villages.

Cell phone service has been wiped out for three quarters of the population. The country's agriculture has been devastated, with 80 percent of its crops destroyed.

Descriptions of conditions in Puerto Rico as "apocalyptic" are anything but hyperbole.

As in every such "natural disaster," Hurricane Maria has exposed the deep-going social oppression, poverty and inequality that existed before the storm ever made landfall in a territory where the poverty rate approaches 50 percent, and unemployment 12 percent.

"We've not seen any help. Nobody's been out asking what we need or that kind of thing," Maria Gonzalez, 74, in the Santurce district of San Juan, told Reuters. Pointing to Condado, the Puerto Rican capital's tourist area of hotels and restaurants, she added, "There's plenty of electricity over there, but there's nothing in the poor areas."

Nearly one week after Hurricane Maria struck the island with the full force of a near-Category 5 storm, US President Donald Trump took his first public notice of the disaster with a Monday night tweet. "Texas & Florida are doing great but Puerto Rico, which was already suffering from broken infrastructure & massive debt, is in deep trouble," Trump tweeted. "Much of the Island was destroyed, with billions of dollars...owed to Wall Street and the banks which, sadly, must be dealt with."

The combination of ignorance and arrogance contained in this statement is the product not just of Donald Trump's fascistic and pathological social outlook, but rather an expression of the criminal negligence, parasitism and predatory character of an entire social system. Trump's apparent intention was to contrast Texas and Florida—both "doing great"—with

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Puerto Rico, which he suggests is responsible for the catastrophe that has befallen it because of its status as a bankrupt debtor to the Wall Street banks.

The reality is that large portions of the populations of Houston and Florida, the working class and the poor, are doing anything but "great," having lost their homes, their cars and, in some cases, their jobs, and left struggling to obtain the means to live.

As to Puerto Rico's $73 billion debt—roughly equal to the $72 billion that is now estimated in damages caused by Hurricane Maria—it is the legacy of over a century of colonialism dating back to the Spanish American War of 1898.

The so-called "Associated Free State" of Puerto Rico (established in 1952 following the brutal suppression of a nationalist revolt) supposedly gave Puerto Ricans local self-government as well as American citizenship. It was a second-class citizenship at best, however, without congressional representation or the right to vote in presidential elections.

While at the time Washington fostered the development in its "perfumed colony" of manufacturing, principally pharmaceuticals, textiles, petrochemicals and electronics, through corporate tax breaks and low-wage labor, these measures were later rescinded as cheaper labor platforms became available to American capital in Asia and elsewhere.

Local self-government has been effectively abrogated with the creation of a US-appointed Fiscal Supervisory Board (JSF), which has overriding power over the territory's budget and is charged with imposing austerity measures aimed at meeting payments to Wall Street bondholders and the predatory hedge funds that sought out distressed Puerto Rican debt.

This is Trump's main concern—that blood be soaked from the stone of an island thrust back a century in terms of its economic and social conditions.

The shameful failure of the US government to provide adequate relief to the Puerto Rican people is driven by considerations of profit and the interests of billionaire bankers and hedge fund chiefs. They are already calculating how the devastation of Hurricane Maria can be exploited through privatization fire sales of public infrastructure and the reaping of further super-profits off America's Caribbean colony.

Trump has idiotically attempted to excuse this failure to provide adequate aid by asserting—falsely—that Puerto Rico is "in the middle of a...really, really big ocean."

No one can claim with a straight face that if Puerto Rico were the target of an invasion—such as Iraq in 2003—the Pentagon would not have already opened its ports and made its airport fully operational. As it is, relief supplies collected by Puerto Rican and American working people in the US sit in warehouses and on docks in Miami and elsewhere because the incentive to aid the island's people is nowhere near that which drives US wars of aggression across the globe.

The one thing that Washington has been able to do efficiently is dispatch troops and police to the island with the objective of suppressing social revolt.

The disaster in Puerto Rico, like those in Houston and Florida that preceded it, has made it abundantly clear that neither recovery, much less protection, from devastating disasters like those wrought by Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria can be achieved outside of a frontal assault on the stranglehold exercised by the ruling financial oligarchy over social wealth and the productive forces of society.

It is the working class of Puerto Rico, united with workers in the United States and internationally, which must accomplish this task through a revolutionary struggle to reorganize society on the foundations of socialist ownership of the means of production and the world's resources.

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