

“We need help and the politicians are ignoring us”

Puerto Rican survivors describe dire conditions after hurricane

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2 October 2017

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with two residents of Arroyo, Puerto Rico, about the desperate conditions on the hurricane-ravaged island and the lack of aid from US government officials. The town of 20,000 on the southeastern shore of the US territorial island was hit when Hurricane Maria made landfall on September 20 with wind gusts up to 155 miles per hour and powerful storm surges from the Caribbean Sea, only a few kilometers away. The Category 4 storm, the strongest to hit Puerto Rico since 1928, did severe damage to homes, businesses, power lines and roads in the town, which used to be a center of sugar production.

Laura Merrill is a former New York City sanitation worker who recently retired to Puerto Rico. Marisol Ruiz is a nurse's aide from Allentown, Pennsylvania who moved to the island five months ago. The two, who have been cut off from family and friends because of the lack of cellphone and internet service, spoke to the WSWWS after they found a single block in the city with cellphone reception.

“People are trying to help one another but it is a desperate situation,” Laura said. “There is cargo with emergency supplies just sitting on the docks because, the governor says, there are not enough drivers to deliver them. There is no action. We need help immediately.

“We know that the national guard and FEMA are here but we haven't gotten any official announcements. If it weren't for WAPA radio we would have no idea what is going on.

“They say 16 were killed but no one knows the real death toll because they have not reached the mountain areas in the central part of the island,” Laura said.

“The power is out and it is especially bad for the

elderly,” Marisol added. “In San Juan, a couple died because they did not have electricity for life support. There are wealthy people in the capital, but most people are humble. People are dying because they don't have access to health care or sanitation. If they don't have families, we just don't know what happened to them.

“It was 91 degrees (32.7 Celsius) today,” Marisol said. “We heard in a rural area of Patillas someone had to bury a family member in the backyard because the body had decomposed so badly and no one from the mortuary could come. There is also lots of standing water, which is attracting mosquitos and the danger of diseases,” she added. “We need help. They have to send in more supplies.”

“One of the only supermarkets around here was damaged and nothing was salvageable,” Laura commented. “There is no ice except in the hospitals. People are trying to help but it's pandemonium because the government aid is so slow like it was in Haiti after the earthquake.

“They have a 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew and government will arrest you if you're out,” Laura added. “There are no ATM machines and people can't withdraw money from their accounts. I drove an hour, leaving at 2:30 a.m. to get to an ATM. By 6 a.m. the line was wrapped around the block. Then they had a \$100 limit. People are also waiting three to four hours on lines for gasoline. Some just run out of gas while waiting.

“There is no water. People are also lining up to get into Walmart for five or six hours, and then when they get in, the shelves are empty. If you don't have a car, forget about it. People are scared.”

“There is no medicine and there is a real need for doctors and nurses,” Marisol said. “People have lost

everything, and I mean everything. The only things they have is what's on their backs. We need help and the politicians are ignoring us.”

Responding to Trump's indifference to the plight of the island's residents and his insistence that Puerto Ricans must pay off the Wall Street bondholders, Laura said, “The debt doesn't matter— people have to get assistance. We pay 12 percent taxes. Our kids are recruited to fight the wars.”



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