

Puerto Rico power blackout the biggest in US history

Rafael Azul
24 October 2017

One month after Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico, the bulk of the US island territory is still without electrical power, a blackout that is the most extensive in modern US history. Some 3 million people are without electricity, and there are predictions that some remote parts of the mountainous island will not see power restored until next June.

While the hurricane caused the initial damage, the long-term power failure demonstrates the combined impact of the relatively primitive character of the island's infrastructure before the storm, and the complete indifference of the US government and the Trump administration since Maria swept through the island.

The power restoration has been hampered by an acute shortage of skilled labor, according to press reports this weekend. While thousands of repair workers went to Texas and Florida after hurricanes Harvey and Irma, only 300 workers from outside Puerto Rico are now on the island repairing infrastructure and restoring service, leaving the main work to the overburdened staff of the 900 working for the island's public utility, AEE.

Similarly, according to the *New York Times*, the Army Corps of Engineers, in overall charge of the recovery effort, has mobilized only 200 of the 2,000 workers it needs for power restoration, and most of these are installing emergency generators, not repairing the devastated infrastructure.

By contrast, more than 5,000 out-state utility workers went to Texas and 15,000 went to Florida, enabling rapid restoration of power in both storm-damaged regions.

Another startling statistic: The Federal Emergency Management Agency says that only 392 of Puerto Rico's 5,073 miles of road were open this week, about 8 percent, one month after the hurricane.

"Electricity is something you do not notice until its gone," says a Vox News Service article, which on Monday painted a picture of what it is to live without electricity for over a month, even for those that have some access to gasoline-driven generators. Roughly 79 percent of households have no electricity. The reader is confronted with people having seen stored food going bad, isolated from intermittent mobile phone service, and with no air conditioning or refrigeration.

"When the power goes out, that sense of comfort quickly disappears. The parts of daily life that were once taken for granted are suddenly gone, with no clear sense of when they'll be back. To not have power—to be literally and figuratively in the dark—is to leave the modern world and retreat into an older and more precarious one. In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, that's Puerto Rico's new normal."

At the current pace of repairs, it will take months to restore power in the island, longer in some isolated locations. Estimates for the cost of the repair range upwards of \$5 billion.

Meanwhile, the demand for generators has skyrocketed, as have their prices, placing them out of reach for most. "There are regular reports of generators being stolen" by desperate Puerto Ricans.

The lack of electricity also affects the supply of clean, filtered and potable water, and the treatment of sewage, as well as the relief effort itself.

"That means the lack of electricity is a literal life-and-death issue—and one that may wind up killing more Puerto Ricans than the storm itself. The island's government says 48 people died because of the hurricane, but my colleagues Eliza Barclay and Alexia Fernández Campbell estimate that the real death toll from the storm is probably well into the hundreds."

"That number could spike even higher if the

blackouts continue because the island needs electricity to operate its water and sewage systems; if the grid remains offline, huge numbers of Puerto Ricans will be at real risk of dying from heatstroke, dehydration, or exposure to contaminated water.”

As predicted, the mosquito population has exploded, helping spread deadly tropical diseases. That and the failure of air conditioning (no electricity) means that more children are playing outside, prey to those mosquito-borne diseases. This is in addition to the leptospirosis outbreak (so far 74 people have been officially reported as infected) that comes from contaminated water entering the bloodstream through cuts and sores.

The government of the US territory is promising an aggressive response to the mosquito problem, with civilian and military crews assigned to abate the insect population. However, a lot of the burden is being placed on parents. They have been asked to control their children’s exposure and to provide mosquito repellent.

When Puerto Rico’s governor, Ricardo Rosselló, met with President Trump in Washington last week he reported that in addition to the near total destruction of Puerto Rico’s outdated electric grid (which has suffering from decades of neglect), 240,000 homes were destroyed by the storms, and 42 roads have been severely damaged. Given Rosselló’s previous estimates, the above calculations are most likely conservative.

In this meeting it was suggested that the total cost estimate of reconstructing Puerto Rico now adds up to \$120 billion. President Trump made it clear that that amount would have to be added to the island’s total \$74 billion debt load to Wall Street. Such a debt could only be serviced at brutal human cost, abolishing pensions and social programs, such as medical care.

The US president, who in previous statements has said that he was leaving the reconstruction of Puerto Rico in the hands of the US Congress, indicated that the island would need a new power plant, to replace a thermo-electric plant, one of the two Palo Seco generating plants near San Juan, not reactivated following the determination by an engineering firm in August—before the storms hit—that it was “near collapse.” The same engineering report also warned that Palo Seco employees were “in danger,” given

conditions at those plants.

Trump made it clear that this new plant would have to be paid for by Puerto Rico, on the basis of new loans to AEE, backed by the federal government. Those loans would take priority over the \$9 billion debt that the AEE has already defaulted on. Rosselló agreed, calling for a public-private alliance, a code phrase for a project that guarantees private profits at public expense.

In response to a question by a reporter about Trump’s remark on debt financing for Puerto Rico, Rosselló attempted to place it in the light of rebuilding efforts. At the same time, Rosselló declined to expand on his answer, allegedly because Puerto Rico is undergoing bankruptcy proceedings under Title III of the *Promesa* bankruptcy legislation for the territory.

Congress is close to approving a \$4.9 billion liquidity line of credit requested by the Puerto Rican government and urged on by the Financial Oversight Board. Any hope by Rosselló that this smaller amount would be given to Puerto Rico as a grant, not a loan, were dashed by Trump. This, too, will have to be added to the debt load.

In his meeting with Rosselló, Trump repeated what he said in his tweets of October 12, that Puerto Rico represents a burden to the US federal budget, threatening to end federal assistance to this US colony.

Trump’s brutal indifference is not unique to Puerto Rico, an island that today represents one of the more extreme examples of life under capitalism. Just as with Greece, Detroit, Houston and many other cities and regions, the profit needs of the financial oligarchy are placed above the needs of human beings.

While Trump stands with the oligarchs of Wall Street, it is up to the international working class to stand with Puerto Rico, demand the planned rebuilding of Puerto Rico, beginning with cancellation of the old debt and the designation of billions of dollars in a massive effort to restore Puerto Rico on the basis of the most advanced technologies available.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact