

# Bernie Sanders tries to quell anger in Puerto Rico

**Rafael Azul****1 November 2017**

More than six weeks after Hurricane María ravished Puerto Rico, and with anger over the Trump administration's indifferent response reaching a breaking point, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders made a brief visit to the island last Friday, October 27.

Sanders was welcomed at San Juan's Muñoz Marín airport by the capital city's mayor, Carmen Yulín Cruz, who has been an outspoken critic of Trump, along with Governor Ricardo Rosselló, who has largely praised the relief effort.

Sanders arrived as public outcry grew over the \$300 million contract granted to Whitefish Energy, a Montana-based company with close ties to the Trump administration, to help repair the island's devastated electrical grid. The contract to the tiny company was canceled and an FBI investigation announced shortly after Rosselló was forced to urge the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority public utility to cancel the deal.

Sanders toured Playita, an impoverished working-class neighborhood in San Juan's Santurce subdivision, before flying out a few hours later. The district was left isolated for 11 days after the hurricane hit, inundated with floodwaters, its homes destroyed, mired in sewage, with little food and with foul yellow water coming out of their taps. The banner residents hung on an overpass, which read, "SOS Playita needs water and food SOS," became symbolic of the plight of working-class and poor residents on the island.

Across Condado Bay, however, San Juan's wealthy residents have recovered very quickly: roads are clear, water and food are readily available, and affluent residents are able bask in air-conditioned rooms in expensive hotels or luxury condos powered by generators.

Afterwards, Sanders held a press conference at the

Roberto Clemente Coliseum in San Juan, the nerve center of rescue and rebuilding efforts for the Rosselló administration. He also met with trade union leaders who have a long record of collaborating in imposing the austerity measures demanded by Wall Street.

Referring to the Whitefish contract, Sanders said, "Federal funds should not be used to enrich private firms. Funds ought to go to people in need."

Sanders, however, proposed no new funds to meet the massive humanitarian disaster, which a UN panel noted Monday had left more than 80 percent of the population, or 2.8 million people, without electricity, few hospitals functioning, water contaminated, and children, older people, the homeless and disabled, vulnerable to an approaching winter.

The trip came after Sanders and Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren said they would propose a "comprehensive plan" for the island that included some form of debt forgiveness. Sanders deliberately concealed the fact that the Obama administration—which he fully supported—had imposed a Financial Oversight Board, essentially a banker's dictatorship, to squeeze \$70 billion in debts out of the island's largely impoverished people.

During his remarks, Sanders demagogically criticized Wall Street for robbing resources necessary for education, homes and infrastructure. He did not call for the cancellation or repudiation of the debt, calling instead for the application of bankruptcy procedures in Puerto Rico similar to those available to US municipalities.

This would be cold comfort for the island's population. In 2013-14, a US federal judge used the municipality laws to rape Detroit, slashing public employees' pensions, selling public assets and privatizing services. The looting of Puerto Rico

involved some of the same financial vultures and political figures, including former US judge Steven Rhodes, as that of Detroit. The Obama administration backed the Detroit bankruptcy, which was implemented with the collaboration of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and other unions, which have affiliates in Puerto Rico.

After Sanders' visit to Playita, local leader Cecilia Collazo said the senator's visit had "brought hope." Indeed, Sanders has largely taken over the role of Jesse Jackson, during the 1980s, 90s and early 2000s, who would travel from one political flashpoint to another to urge angry workers and youth to "keep hope alive," above all in the Democratic Party.

During his campaign for the presidential bid of the Democratic Party, Sanders traveled from depressed coal mining regions of Appalachia to deindustrialized Rust Belt states to the poisoned city of Flint, Michigan, urging workers to keep their faith in the Democratic Party, and after winning 13 million votes from workers and young people who mistakenly believed Sanders was a socialist, he told his supporters to back the Wall Street shill and warmonger Hillary Clinton.



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