

Puerto Rican teachers arrested at protest demanding reopening of schools

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Twenty-one teachers in Puerto Rico were arrested Tuesday afternoon during a protest at the Education Department headquarters in San Juan, where they were demanding the reopening of schools throughout the hurricane-ravaged island.

Seven weeks after Hurricane Maria struck, fewer than half of the nearly 1,200 public schools are operating in any capacity. While many suffered severe storm and flood damage, others were repaired and cleaned to shelter hurricane victims and are ready to take in students. Teachers charge that Department of Education Secretary Julia Keleher is using the crisis as an opportunity to close hundreds of public schools, lay off senior teachers and privatize public education.

The Puerto Rican Teachers Federation (Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico, FMPR) organized the civil disobedience protest after mounting pressure from teachers and parents who have demanded the opening of their local schools.

Keleher is following the model pursued after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, which the Bush administration and local Democrats used to lay off 7,000 teachers and transform the city into an all-charter school district.

Many corporate and financial vultures are already circling the island, eyeing its heavily indebted public electrical company, school system and other public services for privatization. In May, Puerto Rico Governor Ricardo Rosselló announced a savage austerity plan as part of the bankruptcy restructuring of the island's \$70 billion in debt, which included the closing of 184 schools.

In an October 30 interview with *El Nuevo Día*, Keleher said, "Consolidating schools makes sense. They can go out and protest in the streets, but that doesn't change the fact that we can't go back to life

being the same as it was before the hurricane." She said that the education department would have to reduce the number of teachers.

Keleher also praised US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos for her "funding flexibility" and urged Congress to waive requirements for adult and special education. She told *Education Week* that she wants something similar to the funding package given to schools in Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina. "Those restart funds were huge," Keleher said. "If we're strategic about it, it's only going to advance our reforms quicker."

As in Houston after Hurricane Harvey, workers in Puerto Rico took the initiative when the Trump administration and local authorities failed to respond to the catastrophe produced by Hurricane Maria. Teachers have cleared downed trees and power lines, and cleaned and repaired school buildings. Other volunteers, including in the mainland US, have collected school supplies for the island's 350,000 school children.

"The teachers have come to school with chain saws to clear trees and debris," Annie Diaz-Serrano, a resident of suburban Detroit collecting school supplies to send to the island, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "The buildings are made of cement and you clean it with bleach and water. Some of the teachers who get hold of extra generators bring them to school for power, but it is limited. In the countryside, there is no electricity.

"Toa Baja was flattened. It is in a mountainous area and it was hit by mudslides, bridge collapses, overflowing rivers that wiped out houses—a total disaster. I was on Facebook and I saw a posting from a teacher with an SOS asking for supplies and encouraging notes for the kids. I've packed boxes with donated goods to the max and sent them out.

"The main thing is the kids. They were traumatized.

You're in the middle of the night and a hurricane blows the roof off your house. Your parents grab you while you are half asleep and everything is a commotion. Then, afterwards, you see your parents struggling without work, electricity or water. They need art, they need escape, they need normalcy. That's why the teachers are asking for crayons, coloring books, backpacks, notebooks and pencils."

"They don't know what the real death count is," Diaz added, "because a lot of areas to this day have not been reached. There are lots of people who are unaccounted for. When the ocean came in it could have taken bodies out to sea. There are estimates of up to 900 dead. I know a lot of doctors in Puerto Rico and here who have communications with doctors there. Physicians talk shop and they say, 'There is no electricity, and we are in the middle of surgery. We are using the flashlights on our phones.' The reality is people are still dying in hospitals as a result of power failures.

"Waterborne illnesses are prevalent. People are doing their wash in the creeks because the pumps that bring water to the towns in the mountains are run by electricity. If the pump is not working, there is no water. Mosquitos, a lot of dead animals, rats, I mean it's tropical and the water is like a soup of germs."

"There is a lot of frustration with FEMA and the Trump administration. What Trump did, throwing paper towels at people, was about the most insulting thing you could do to a Puerto Rican. I remember growing up and always remembering the phrase, 'Las cosas no se tiran, las cosas se dan,' which means, 'Things are not thrown, you hand things to people.'"

Annie's husband, Amaury, a car designer, added, "When I was growing up in Puerto Rico, I always had an admiration for American Pop culture, with Hollywood and the car industry. I took it for granted that Americans will take care of Americans, whether they live in Mira Lago or in Puerto Rico. But they have not gone without electricity for seven weeks at Trump's resort. The people of Puerto Rico only want electricity and water. The sad part is to realize that this is not the country that I thought I was living in."

Laura Mitchell, a retired New York City sanitation woman who lives in Arroyo, one of the worst hit towns when Hurricane Maria made landfall on September 20, spoke to the WSWs by cellphone from her darkened apartment, which still lacks electricity. Only 42 percent

of the island's population has power.

"The teachers were having a peaceful protest when the cops came and roughed them up and took them away in handcuffs. The new superintendent, who is paid a lot of money, wants to close 184 schools, even though there is nothing wrong with them. Many schools were supposed to open last week, but they didn't. It's all part of the agenda. The Democrats and Republicans, and their parties here, are just out for the money.

"Thousands are leaving the island because unemployment is high, they've lost their homes or they don't have electricity. But half of the 25,000 people who left for Florida have been put up in shelters. They thought they would get housing and a good job. Instead they are getting the lowest-paying jobs and are waiting in shelters until something opens up.

"My friend teaches first to fifth grade and she is taking her kid with her to Florida because they are cutting teachers and their salaries. If they eliminate schools, it means spending less money. I am afraid that Puerto Rico will be worse after the hurricane. I don't agree with the privatization of the electrical company. How many workers will lose their jobs? They are already starting to charge for sanitation here, and what will it cost for power once they privatize it?"



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