

DeVos visits Puerto Rico to boost privatization of public schools

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As scores of public school teachers marched in San Juan Thursday to demand the reopening of their schools, US Education Secretary Betsy DeVos visited Puerto Rico to further the ongoing project of converting the island's public schools into for-profit charter schools.

The billionaire heiress who has long funded schemes to privatize public education met with Puerto Rico's education secretary Julia Keleher, who is looking at post-Katrina New Orleans as the model for the US territory. The Bush administration and local Democratic Party authorities used the 2005 hurricane to lay off thousands of teachers and transform New Orleans into an all-charter school district.

Members of the Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico rallied at the headquarters of the Department of Education in San Juan to demand a meeting with Keleher. The FMPR union has charged Keleher with deliberately keeping many of the island's schools closed, even after teachers and other volunteers have cleared them of debris and cleaned them, because she intends to permanently shutter them. Earlier this year Governor Ricardo Rosselló announced a plan to close 184 schools as part of a debt restructuring plan to pay off the vulture funds that control much of the island's more than \$70 billion in bond debt.

Puerto Rican Schools were badly damaged by Hurricanes Irma and Maria. They began to reopen on October 23. Since then 614 out of 1,113 have reopened. However, most of the schools that are open still have no electricity, along with 58 percent of the island's inhabitants. More than 150,000 students have no school to attend.

Neither Keleher nor DeVos bothered talking to any teacher, protesting or not, during the trip by the US education secretary, who also visited the US Virgin

Islands.

DeVos, Keleher and Rosselló stopped at Loaiza Cordero Elementary School in San Juan, which still remains closed. Torrential rains and sewage-laden water flooded the school during and following Hurricane Maria. Both school officials declared that it would be hard to reopen the remaining schools.

An estimated 14,000 students and an unknown number of teachers have left since Hurricane Maria. Of these, 6,400 students now attend schools on the mainland, mostly Florida, but also in New York, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania.

During a press conference, FMPR president Mercedes Martínez condemned Keleher's go-slow policy, pointing out that many of the 500 schools that have not been reopened are ready to go largely due to the volunteer efforts of the teachers and local parents. Keleher and other education officials, Martínez charged, have ignored those schools that need additional repairs, and said many of the students who left did so because it is taking too long to open the schools.

Last Monday, Emilio Nieves, the leader of the smaller Puerto Rican teachers union, UNETE (*Unión Nacional de Educadores y Trabajadores de la Educación*, National Educators and Education Workers Union) called on Governor Rosselló to sack Keleher. Nieves accused the education secretary of attempting to intimidate school principals who had welcomed children into their schools and pointed out that even undamaged schools, which had functioned as shelters during the first weeks after the storm, have yet to open.

According to the online journal the *Intercept*, Puerto Rico's Department of Education has indicated that about one-fifth of the existing schools will not reopen. The governor appointed Keleher, a businesswoman and

founder of the consulting firm Keleher Associates, last December.

Keleher has made no secret of her plans to privatize public schools and transform them into charter schools. This May, way before the island was struck by Hurricanes Irma and Maria, Keleher closed 179 schools, which allegedly had less than 250 students attending them, to save \$7 million. This forced many students from rural districts to travel several kilometers to distant schools. At the time, the BBC quoted social worker Luzaina Peña, the mother of a 5-year-old, from Toa Alta, saying, “This is a mountain region and the new school is three kilometers (1.8 miles) from home.”

At the time, the Education Department claimed it had selected the schools to be closed after performing an “exhaustive analysis” throughout the island. Not so, declared parents, who indicated never having been consulted.

“Our school is our pride,” said Adneri Rivera, herself a teacher and mother of a preschooler from the municipality of Corozal in the center of the island. “This school has helped develop people who have shined become great sculptors, painters, even a Miss Puerto Rico,” she told the BBC. Rivera described going to an assembly in which parents were informed of the decision to close the Hipolito Caldero school and were given just two minutes to speak.

Twenty-seven thousand students were forced to change schools and 2,700 teaching jobs were eliminated. The sackings affected mostly contingent, at will teachers. To this Keleher responded coldly that she was not running an “employment agency.”

In July, she declared her intention of converting 100 schools into charter schools. The transformation of schools into charters will allow the entry of private corporations who seek to profit from cost cutting and attacking teachers’ wages and benefits, including pensions.

The Education Secretary who said she considers the privatization of New Orleans’ schools as a “point of reference” declared in a recent tweet that Puerto Ricans “should not underestimate the damage or the opportunity to create new, better schools.” Last Monday she added that the catastrophic storm provides a “real opportunity to press the reset button” on Puerto Rico’s education system.

She also told *El Nuevo Día*, “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.”

Keleher, like DeVos, sees the catastrophe wrought by the recent hurricanes as a golden opportunity for corporate “school reform” policies carried out by Democrats and Republicans alike, and their counterparts on the island, to line the pockets of education business executives and destroy public education and conditions and living standards of teachers.

For their part, the teachers unions in Puerto Rico, including the ostensibly more radical FMPR, have proven incapable of opposing the savage austerity measures and the sabotage by the American Federation of Teachers, the SEIU and other unions from the mainland.

Even before the hurricanes, Puerto Rican school children suffered from the consequences of poverty and the financial crisis, which is the product of the colonial legacy of the island and the looting by Wall Street. About 411,000 students attended the island’s schools, 78.5 of them from households below the line of poverty; 31 percent of them require special education programs.



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