

Puerto Rican unions propose to partner with the Wall Street's financial control board

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Hurricanes Irma and María left a trail of destruction throughout Puerto Rico, delivering a devastating blow to the island's economic infrastructure, roads, water, dams, bridges, and particularly its electricity services.

A few days ago, a WSWWS reader in a rural area south of San Juan wrote, "Still a great part of the population is without electricity. On October 14, Governor Ricardo Rosselló promised that 95 percent of the population would have power by December 15. In a recent interview, he avoided the '95% generation' promise and instead talked about how this goal was just to keep up the sense of urgency to repair the power system."

According to the site status.pr, as of today there is only 68.40 percent generation. The US Army Corps of Engineers said it is very unlikely that the governor's promised goal will be achieved by December 15. For some regions in the center of the island it is estimated it will take until March 2018 for power to be fully restored.

In many of the towns in the central, mountainous region, our correspondent reported, the population still has no access to clean water and many still need to wade across rivers to get food and clean water.

In another article this week, government officials and AEE (Puerto Rico's public electricity utility) functionaries said repairs were taking so long because of the lack of materials. They reported that because of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma much of the needed material is being used to repair damage in the mainland US and is not available for the US island territory.

According to the US Army Corps of Engineers, approximately 48,000 utility poles were damaged and only 2,000 per week are arriving to the island. At the current rate of importation, it may take 24 weeks just to gather the material and equipment, pushing the resumption of full service back to April or May 2018.

None of this is new, or merely a result of Hurricane Maria. For years, the island's electric utility had ceased importing spare poles and other critical parts, as a consequence of the slide into bankruptcy of the company and of Puerto Rico as a whole. The AEE's abandonment of a preventive maintenance program, and its failure to update a hurricane plan, left the electrical system extremely vulnerable to the record storm that hit the island on September 20.

In a recent interview with *Claridad*, Ricardo Santos, former president of Puerto Rico's electrical workers union (UTIER), said AEE had "stopped purchasing equipment that is normally required. In fact, in some areas the AEE would recycle materials, by removing parts from one plant and installing them in another."

In May, the Rosselló administration filed for bankruptcy after defaulting on a \$74.8 billion debt, along with a \$20 billion shortfall on public worker pensions. Two months later AEE declared bankruptcy on a \$9 billion debt, after three years of restructuring, mass layoffs and other cutbacks.

The Financial Oversight and Management Board (FOMB) appointed by former President Barack Obama has exercised dictatorial control of the island's budget and spending on behalf of Wall Street. While the board temporarily suspended the imposition of austerity measures following the storms, Puerto Rico's creditors, particularly the speculative vulture funds that buy bad loans at a discount, never ceased petitioning the courts and the FOMB, building their case to loot the meager resources of Puerto Rico.

On December 22, the Rosselló administration is scheduled to submit a new plan to repay the debt. On Tuesday academics, business and trade union leaders met to urge the board to suspend austerity measures until the economy recovers from the storm.

Echoing the calls for public-private partnerships (privatization and deregulation) by political officials and business leaders, the union bureaucrats in Puerto Rico are calling for a FOMB-trade union “partnership.” The officials pledged their willingness to cooperate with the FOMB, proposing that unions, together with the creditors, appeal for federal aid from the Trump administration.

Julie Kushner, leader of UAW region 9A, which includes Puerto Rico, declared, “We want to work with you and not against you.” Other members of the Puerto Rican trade union bureaucracy echoed Kushner’s proposals, offering their own advice on how to enforce austerity measures.

Using the same language that bankers and neo-liberal government officials use, Kushner added, “the hurricane probably gave us the ‘opportunity’ of us going together to the federal government to ask for real help for Puerto Rico’s recovery.”

UTIER leader Angel Figueroa Jaramillo, who claims not to believe in the Financial Oversight and Management Board, pathetically called on the FOMB to “listen to the workers this time,” instead of lawyers and economists.

For his part, Roberto Pagan, head of the Union of Puerto Rican Workers (*Sindicato Puertorriqueño de Trabajadores*), counseled FOMB officials that the migration of workers to Florida and other US states would continue unless wages stop falling. Pagan said that “labor reforms” imposed last January have not worked, and that new pro-business programs are needed to stimulate economic growth, all in the context of a union-FOMB partnership.

Massive austerity—resulting in school closings, public sector layoffs and the gutting of the University of Puerto Rico—has provoked widespread opposition. Now Wall Street and its political stooges on the island are seeking to use the hurricane as an opportunity to escalate plans to privatize public education, the electrical grid and other public services, slash the wages and benefits of workers, and hand over even more tax cuts and subsidies to big business.

Already public-school teachers, parents and students have been involved in protests demanding the reopening of schools, which the island’s education secretary has deliberately kept closed even though volunteers have cleared them of debris and repaired

them. This is only the beginning of the social opposition against the Trump administration and the Democrats and Republicans in Washington, and their collaborators in Puerto Rico.

Under these conditions, the trade unions are seeking to block the eruption of the class struggle and impose the dictates of the corporate and financial elite. Puerto Rican workers must reject this and demand the repudiation of the debt. This must be combined with a struggle for a vast expansion of hurricane relief and the launching of a massive public works program to repair and upgrade the island’s infrastructure, including the electrical grid. In this fight, Puerto Rican workers must appeal for solidarity with workers in the US and across the Americas who face similar attacks by the banks and vulture funds.



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