

“The rich people are not going to do anything for us”

University of Puerto Rico students speak on inequality and the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria

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Hundreds of thousands of students in Puerto Rico have resumed the fall semester after a prolonged shutdown following Hurricane María’s landfall on the island almost three months ago. Many of the school buildings are damaged, some are still without electricity, and others are open for only a few hours a day.

The University of Puerto Rico (UPR), the only public university on the island, was closed for over a month. Students at the campus in Río Piedras spoke with our reporting team about the effects of the hurricane on education, the political issues it has raised, and the way forward for the working class in Puerto Rico.

One student, Yamir Torres-Ramirez, explained that some students, including those at UPR in Río Piedras, have been out of school since before hurricane María. “We started the semester at UPR on September 4. On September 5, we had to leave because of Hurricane Irma. After a couple of weeks, the university reopened, but just a few days later, Maria hit. In total we were out of school for more than a month. It’s hard on students because we don’t want to fall behind on our goals.”

The students at UPR will have to extend their semester until March, and the spring semester is planned to continue well into summer to make up for the lost time.

Yamir explained that the effects of the hurricane are still present in every aspect of life. “The hurricanes came a couple of months ago, but the disaster is still upon us. Without power and water, it’s like living in the stone age.”

“A friend of mine in my home town also still does not have power in his building, and he has to use a machine to treat his asthma. He has to go to a restaurant or somewhere with power and connect his machine to do his

breathing therapy. It’s a shame that people have to live like this.”

Yamir told us that the devastation from Hurricane María was greatly exacerbated by social inequality. Puerto Rico is one of the three most unequal societies on the planet, and the recovery efforts since the hurricane have laid bare the stark class divisions on the island.

“In Puerto Rico we can see how the rich, the people that have more resources and contacts, they already have power in their neighborhoods, while the poor neighborhoods don’t. I think there should be priorities for hospitals and nursing homes, but not for the rich neighborhoods. It’s very sad that, no matter what, it’s always about the money. It could be a hurricane, a fire, a debt crisis, or an economic crash. The rich will always get the priority.”

We spoke to Yamir about the vast sums of money that are poured into US imperialist wars abroad every year. We asked him what he thought the working class would choose to do with the \$700 billion military budget that was passed this year. He replied, “Any down-to-earth person would see that we should use that money to help the future generations. To better educate our students, to become doctors and teachers, or to be whatever they want to be.”

The staggering level of inequality throughout the world was an issue raised by all the students interviewed. One student, Michael, expressed immense hostility to the tax bill that is being pushed through Congress. “While the United States government was busy passing this tax bill to give the rich even more money, here in Puerto Rico we have received hardly anything. The FEMA efforts have been very limited, and there haven’t been enough

resources provided for recovery.”

He went on to criticize a slogan being pushed by various political tendencies throughout the island, “Puerto Rico se levanta,” which translates to “Puerto Rico rises.”

“There is this hashtag that is going around which says that it is important that Puerto Rico ‘se levanta’ but you know what? It is going to be very difficult for Puerto Rico to ‘rise’ because the actual resources people need are impossible to get.”

“There are so many people who in reality are trying to survive day to day, and meanwhile there are many rich people who are in control who are not really helping at all, but they insist ‘Puerto Rico se levanta’. So this is a political cover. They are not really paying attention to what is going on.”

We spoke to Michael about the plight of workers and youth in Texas after their hurricane and the conditions facing people in Flint, Michigan, who have not had clean water for over three years. We asked him what he would say to the working class in those areas if he could.

“If I could say something to the people in Flint and Houston who are suffering like us here in Puerto Rico, I would say that the change needs to come from us the people, not from the government. The rich people are not going to do anything for us.”

The students at UPR have a tradition of resistance. They shut down the campus for three months in 2010. Earlier this year, students organized a strike against proposed cuts to the university as part of a slew of austerity measures to address the ongoing debt crisis, now at \$70 billion. The students went on strike for months.

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Ian explained how the cuts education were a part of a broader attack on the working class of Puerto Rico. “They’re taking advantage of what has happened to the island. I have a conspiracy theory that they want to empty this island little by little to then have the opportunity to do whatever they want with this place. And the privatization of education is part of the conspiracy. They are cutting lots of funds to the university. We had a strike in April, through June, because they want to cut funds and close departments like the music department. Little by little they are taking everything from education.”

“I believe education is a right! Everyone has the right to develop their own knowledge and abilities. It’s not fair to privatize our only public university.”

Two other students, Coral and Gina, told us about the demands of the students during the protests. “We had a

strike here at the university against tuition hikes,” Gina said. “There are students who don’t have enough money to eat and live. It is unreal because they are robbing us of our money through tuition, and it is not because there isn’t enough money. It is because they don’t use the money to help students.”

“We wanted the debt to be audited so we could know why there was a debt. We wanted to know *why* we were paying more if they insisted on raising the tuition. In the end they refused to show us what had happened. And of course this is because the debt wasn’t from of any legitimate cause. It came from corruption. The same thing is happening regarding the debt of Puerto Rico. They wouldn’t want us to know what the debt is really about. They wouldn’t want us to see the books because they know it is from corrupt dealings.”

Carol and Gina expressed skepticism that there was a way forward to bring about the changes that they wanted to see in the world. WSWs reporters asked, “What if there was a movement that was fighting for free education, free healthcare, for millions and even billions to rebuild Puerto Rico, to use to provide water and infrastructure and everything that is needed? If there was movement fighting to unite workers here in Puerto Rico with the workers on the mainland of the US and with workers of other countries for the rights of the working class, would you support it?”

Coral responded, “Yo definitivamente con todo mi fuerza, me levantaría apoyar un movimiento, y a ser parte de un movimiento, Que nos diera los derechos básicos humanos que necesitamos para vivir. ”

In English this means, “I definitely, with all of my power, would rise up to support a movement, to be part of a movement that would give us the basic human rights that we need to live.”

Coral and Gina, and many of the other students we spoke to at the university, were very excited about the prospect of starting a chapter of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at UPR.



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