

“The poverty is no longer hidden by the trees”

Hurricane Maria exposes the conditions of life for the working class in Caguas, Puerto Rico

Genevieve Leigh, Zac Corrigan
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Adelaida Montañez, 69, is preparing a large batch of rice and beans over a woodfire stove just outside her home in Caguas, Puerto Rico, about 20 miles from the capital city of San Juan. She explains that the town has had no power or running water since Hurricane Maria made landfall, almost three months ago. The food she is preparing is not for her family but to sell as means of income.

As she navigates her outdoor kitchen, Mrs. Montañez explains that life has been very difficult since the storm. Walking over to a calendar she has hanging on the wall, she says in Spanish, “I have been marking down here each time I go to the store for more gasoline. It has been almost every three days. We need it to run a generator which we use to keep the fridge cool, but only for a few hours a day—it costs us about \$45 each time.”

Next to the calendar just outside the door, Mrs. Montañez has an old wooden washboard where her family does their laundry by hand, since they still have neither running water nor power for their washing machine. Many residents in her part of town have started doing their washing together at a small stream on the side of the road.

Adelaida Montañez worked most of her life at a shoe company in the neighboring town of San Lorenzo. The company, Cinderella Shoes, moved its factory to the Dominican Republic for cheaper labor in 1990, leaving Mrs. Montañez and many others without work. She later got a job making military outfits at another company, Gibraltar, but this factory closed in 1999. She tells us that her husband, Felinio Castro Luge, had worked a good job for many years as a plumber.

Through tears Mrs. Montañez explains that her

husband died shortly after the hurricane because he was unable to get proper medical care. He needed regular dialysis treatment, and with the lack of electricity it was impossible to keep up with his medical needs.

Mrs. Montañez’s daughter says that many of the patients who attended her father’s dialysis clinic needlessly died in the aftermath of the hurricane from lack of medical care. Government figures do not count such deaths in the “official” number of Maria victims.

Mrs. Montañez says that she is greatly concerned about how the hurricane has affected youth and their education. The government and media in Puerto Rico have been proudly reporting that 95 percent of schools are open and operating.

Mrs. Montañez is skeptical of these figures. “I don’t believe that so many schools are open. It took them much too long to open the schools here even though they were not very damaged. But there are still many problems. Most, like the ones here in Caguas, are only open half the day, for example. They do not have electricity or running water. The students have missed so much school this semester—it is such a shame.”

Down the street, WSWs reporters meet two residents, Osvaldo and Virgen, hard at work repairing their home. Osvaldo is a government employee in the recycling department. The couple is unable to live in their house because of the damage from the storm.

As they walk through the dilapidated house, the couple recounts the night of Maria: “We stayed in a small house behind this one which is more secure. We watched from the basement as Maria swept away our roof. Water poured inside and destroyed everything.” Motioning toward the side of the house that is missing a wall, Osvaldo explains that it had been blown away

from the wind.

Oswaldo says that FEMA provided them with a tarp, now a coveted resource on the island. He shows us the military MRE (Meals Ready to Eat) packages that were provided through relief efforts.

Oswaldo has been repairing the house by himself with material left over from the destruction and other parts he can find around town. He explains the ways in which life had changed since the loss of water and power: “Now I keep many buckets in my truck with me all the time. Every time I go to the stream, I fill them up so we can have water for the week and my wife can have water easily while I am at work.”

Running water is now a privilege reserved for a small minority. Generators can be used to power water pumps, but there are not nearly enough to provide for everyone. Instead, they are rotated weekly from community to community so that each area has water for one week. By one estimate, there are over 700 generators running across the island every evening.

Driving through the center of the neighboring town of San Lorenzo, one can see that power has been restored to the wealthier neighborhood of Paseo del Río, while just across the street the more impoverished Tomás de Castro is still in the dark. One worker from Caguas explained that in San Lorenzo some have benefitted from living near large factories, since industrial sites like these were prioritized for repair.

Mrs. Guillermina Castro Vasquez, who is 81 years old and lives in Caguas with her family, tells us that the current situation reminds her of the years of her childhood: “I was born in 1936. Back then we didn’t have light, or washing machines, or any of these things. It has been almost 100 days now since the hurricane, and we are continuing to live without power and running water. In many ways it feels as though we have gone back to the epoch of my youth.”

We ask Mrs. Vasquez what she thinks about the official death count, which remains at 64. Visibly upset, she tells us that this number is *un engaño* (a lie or deception). “They are lying about this number because the politicians are worried. They know it affects the people’s perception of the government.”

Many in the town express the same opinion of the official death toll. One town resident who lived just across the street from the stream used for laundry was found dead in his home just three days ago. His

neighbor, Anthony Castro, 23, told the WSWs that while the man had been sick before the storm, Maria destroyed his home and caused an enormous amount of stress.

Anthony explains that the storm has uncovered the extreme poverty throughout the island. “The inequality on the island is transparent in the recovery efforts. It is nearly three months since the storm, and in my community you can see the fallen powerlines on the side of the road just where they were on September 21st.”

Anthony continues, “But Maria uncovered the poverty in a more literal way too. All the vegetation on the island was destroyed by the storm.”

Motioning to the view of the hillside over his balcony, Anthony says, “When we woke up the next morning, my family and I looked out onto the land. We saw all of these small houses across the hill we never knew were there. This is the case all throughout Puerto Rico. The poverty is no longer hidden by the trees.”



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