

Puerto Rican Governor calls for the closing of a quarter of the island's public schools

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Last Wednesday, Puerto Rico Governor Ricardo Rosselló presented his government's fiscal spending plan for 2018, which calls for \$1.5 billion in cuts, including more than \$300 million to education. These cuts will require the closure of 300 of the 1,100 K-12 schools on the island and could lead to a decrease of 27,500 students and 7,300 teachers by 2022.

This attack on education and other social services comes four months after Hurricane Maria devastated the island. Students at every level have lost at least a semester of their education since the storm hit. Due to the completely inept "recovery" aid provided by the local and federal governments, 30 percent of residents are still struggling without running water or electricity—including about 30 percent of public school buildings, which are still operating on half-day schedules.

In addition to the physical damage to school buildings and the resulting loss of school days, students have lost their clothing, schoolwork, books, and notes. Many educators have left the island permanently, exacerbating an already severe teacher shortage. One school just outside of the capital city of San Juan, the Rio Grande High School, is reporting classes of 90 students, with only one teacher responsible.

In addition to the closures, most schools are now operating without enrichment programs, such as physical education, and with shorter hours. In many cases, the teachers themselves have had to purchase food, clear away debris, repair broken walls and roofs, and buy teaching supplies to get the schools up and running.

The devastating effect of the hurricane on education stretches far deeper than just physical damage and the lack of resources. The immense poverty that existed on the island before the hurricane has been greatly

exacerbated, causing further strain on students, teachers and their families. Before Hurricane Maria, 80 percent of public school students in Puerto Rico came from households below the poverty line.

The public school system had some 350,000 children enrolled, and almost all of them qualified for free meals. Many of these families have since lost their jobs, their homes, and even their loved ones in the storm and its aftermath. The effect that these conditions have had on students and their ability to learn is unimaginable.

Instead of dedicating the resources necessary to repair the schools, aid the students, pay the remaining teachers, and train and hire more, the local and federal governments are using the crisis to push through long-standing plans to privatize education on the island.

The governor has used the damage caused by the hurricane to justify his proposal. One major element is the ongoing population exodus to the mainland United States (the Rosselló administration anticipates a 7.7 percent population drain for this year). However, Rosselló's proposal is not a response to population decline. It is only the latest political maneuver by the ruling class in a long battle with the Puerto Rican working class over the right to public education.

The public school crisis set off by Hurricane Maria represents the culmination of more than a decade of economic depression in the territory. Between 2008 and 2012, Puerto Rican K-12 schools lost 45,000 students and 5,000 teachers. The dropout rate exploded, with 60 percent of 10th graders failing to graduate high school. Between 2010 and 2015, 100 public schools were shut down.

The attack on education is not limited to the K-12 system. Last April and May, six months before Maria, university students at 8 of the system's 11 campuses went on strike against proposed budget cuts of nearly

\$500 million, fully half of the system's budget, demanded by the unelected Fiscal Oversight Board. In addition to striking against the budget cuts, the strikers demanded a moratorium on the entire \$74 billion debt.

Two months later, Governor Rosselló announced the planned closure of 179 public schools. Had the plans not been foiled by Hurricane Maria, the closure would have forced the transfer of 27,000 students and some 3,000 teachers.

Since Maria struck on September 20, the local government has managed to close about 222 public schools, claiming they were too damaged.

In an attempt to pit teachers against each other, and against the wellbeing of their students, the government has offered a paltry wage increase to those teachers that will not be sacked: a yearly increase of \$1,500 (\$125 per month). The raise will come out of the savings generated by the school closures. Elementary school teachers earn a median salary of just \$36,750 per year in Puerto Rico. Starting salaries can be as low as \$19,230.

While rank-and-file teachers in Puerto Rico have bravely shown the way forward by fighting to reopen schools in the face of inaction by Rosselló and Education Secretary Julia Kehler (who favors the privatization of the school system), the same cannot be said for union officials. Neither the head of the Puerto Rican Teachers Association, Aida Díaz, nor anyone in the Teachers Association has proposed organized opposition to defend Puerto Rican schools, teachers and students.

In response to the governor's proposal for the closure of 300 additional schools, Díaz has done nothing more than state that the measures are "not acceptable" and should "raise alarms."

The proposal from Governor Rosselló and his administration should do much more than "raise alarms." It is a full-scale attack on the working class of Puerto Rico and will have serious consequences for the lives and futures of hundreds of thousands of students, teachers and their families.

The experience of the working class in New Orleans is an instructive lesson for how these "natural disasters" are utilized by the ruling class. Two years after the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina, the Bush administration and local officials had overhauled the city's schools and instituted a system dominated by

charter schools—publicly funded schools run by for-profit or non-profit groups. Seventy percent of the city's schools have now become charter schools.

The cuts to education proposed in Rosselló's fiscal plan have not yet been finalized, as all financial decisions must be approved by the dictatorial Financial Oversight and Management Board (FOMB). This board was appointed by former President Barack Obama to control the island's budget and spending on behalf of Wall Street. The FOMB has played a central role in the attack on education since its formation and will undoubtedly support these early steps in the effort to dismantle the public education system.



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