

Notes from Puerto Rico

Thousands of workers in Puerto Rico continue to live without running water

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Antonio Castro lives just outside San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico, on the far east side of the island. Since Hurricane María made landfall on the US territory in late September, conditions have been difficult for Antonio and his family. Like hundreds of thousands of other workers and youth on the island, Antonio continues to struggle without the basic amenities of modern life, including electricity and running water. The following is part of a series of reports on conditions in Puerto Rico.

February 20 will mark five months of life without power for thousands of us here on Puerto Rico since Hurricane María made landfall in September. It is not well known that it has in fact been even longer for many because the smaller Hurricane Irma caused major power outages the month prior to María.

Hurricane María changed our way of life quite dramatically. In addition to being without power, many of us on the island have faced months without running tap water in our homes. As I explained in an earlier article, electricity is needed to pump water to the elevated rural areas and also to power treatment plants. In our community, as in other ones across the island, this means that we must look for alternate sources of water for our daily needs.

Before the storm, most families stored enough supplies for one to two weeks. However, these resources eventually ran out, and everyone had to scramble to replenish their food and clean water supplies however they could. Chaos struck. Gasoline for cars was very scarce, which meant people were largely stranded where they had passed the storm. They could not check on family in other parts of the island, travel long distances for needed supplies, or get

medical care.

The few stores that were able to open had lines that went on for hours and very limited supplies. Many stores took advantage of the situation and raised prices for the most sought-after items, including water. Before the storm, we could buy a 12-bottle pack of water for around \$2 to \$3, but prices rose to \$8 to \$12 dollars after. Containers for both gasoline and water became scarce and expensive. What most of us did was to save any plastic container we could find to keep water. It could be anything from an old detergent jug to recycled paint buckets.

Not having access to clean running water, something so essential for life, has had a serious impact on us. For months we have had to go and fetch water from several resources on a daily basis. Water that is safe enough for cooking and drinking has to be from bottled sources or from an oasis in the downtown area shared by the entire community. The local city government took ages before it provided tank trucks from which we could gather and save drinking water for a few days. For the washing and tasks other than drinking, we head to the local stream or creek. I know of many places on the island where entire families had to gather at rivers and streams to do the washing, dishes, bathing and even drinking.

To collect water from creeks and springs we would reuse an old PVC or metal pipe, improvise a funnel with a plastic bottle and use whatever was at hand to hold the pipe in place often with rocks. This made water collection from the stream efficient, given the circumstances. This was not potable water, so we couldn't drink it or cook with it. Tragically, many people in other parts of the island didn't have such a

choice; they had to use whatever source of water they could find. In the weeks following the hurricane, images emerged of residents in the town of Dorado collecting water from a federally designated hazardous-waste site. Water from this location could be potentially contaminated and be harmful if consumed.

In another town, Canóvanas, people were using spring water that was contaminated with rat urine. The use of river and stream water for drinking led to a leptospirosis breakout among the population in several towns. Local authorities were warning residents not to use unsafe water sources and only use bottled water or safe tap water, as if the people were drinking unsafe water by choice. There was no tap water in homes, limited supplies in stores, in many places still no access to roads and no tank trucks provided by local city government. We had no option but to use whatever water source was available; even rainwater was saved.

I recognize many of the struggles of workers in Kentucky, Flint and Cape Town, South Africa for the right to clean water as part of my own. Thousands of families are living without access to safe water, while government authorities do little to nothing to resolve the issue. We Puerto Rican workers stand in solidarity with workers in all these regions. We are facing the same difficulties because of government indifference to the conditions of the working class. Instead, the capitalists continue to enrich themselves off the labor of the workers and by exploiting situations like the natural disaster that struck Puerto Rico.



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