

Puerto Rican police attack thousands of protesters marching against austerity on May Day

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Thousands of students and workers marched on the capital of Puerto Rico on May Day to protest brutal austerity measures, widespread public school closures, pro-corporate labor reforms and other right-wing government policies. Despite reports of largely peaceful demonstrations, the protesters were viciously attacked by police with tear gas, pepper spray, rubber bullets, and night sticks. Scores of people were injured.

The police violence has gone largely unreported in US media. Rather, most accounts make note of the 15 police injuries claimed by the US territorial island's law enforcement officers. Images and footage of scenes from the day broadcast on social media by workers and youth reveal a very different story. Dozens of posts and videos show gruesome scenes of overwhelming force used by police.

One video posted to a student-run Twitter account called Pulso Estudiantil shows police officers chasing down and arresting two students in a residential community in the capital. The unarmed students are pursued by over 50 armed officers as well as members from a special arrest force. The police forcibly enter a residence, overrunning those inside the gates not involved in the protest. One of the woman students is forced to the ground, surrounded by at least a dozen officers. After a few minutes she is carried away in handcuffs by police. (Video)

Other clips show brigades of officers marching through the streets in military fashion, seemingly patrolling peaceful neighborhoods. Shouts of "Fuera, Fuera" ("out, out"), can be heard in the background. (Video)

Dozens of other posts show photos of bloodied protesters who were beaten by police, with many

arrested. Some individuals reported that police entered their homes to attack them. (Photo)

The march involved thousands of people and was held in conjunction with a one day, island-wide general strike. In the capital of San Juan, one section of the march stretched completely across a 1,000-foot bridge that connects Condado to Old San Juan.

As planned, multiple marches converged in the financial district in San Juan, where together they proceeded towards the Seaborne Building, home to the despised Financial Oversight Board (FOMB), which is tasked with overseeing the looting of pensions and austerity measures against the working class and poor.

The FOMB is a cabal of representatives of banks and corporate interests organized into an unelected seven-member board that commands complete control over all financial decisions on the island. It was instituted by the Obama administration to secure bond holder payments from the \$74 billion of debt currently plaguing the island.

The most recent fiscal plan drawn up by the board includes cutting pensions for public service workers by 10 percent, eliminating mandatory Christmas bonuses, reducing vacation and sick time, passing new legislation allowing business to fire employees without having to prove just cause, closing 280 more public schools, and privatizing the electric utility PREPA. The implementation of these measures are a matter of life and death for thousands of workers. Economists are predicting that the poverty rate on the island of 3.3 million people could increase from 45 percent to more than 60 percent if these measures are implemented.

The police began their assault when the protesters began their procession towards the building of the

FOMB. The attack was meant to send a clear message: every measure in the arsenal of the ruling class will be used to defend its financial interests, including physical violence.

There is no shortage of anger or willingness to fight among the Puerto Rican working class. Like workers throughout the US, workers in Puerto Rico have endured decades of attacks on living conditions and social services.

In addition to serving as a major base of operations for the US military, the island's economy has been driven into the ground to provide cheap labor and a tax haven for US-based multinational corporations. The result of these policies is some of the most extreme levels of poverty in the US, massive unemployment and social services starved of resources.

This situation was drastically exacerbated when Hurricane Maria hit the island last September. Now, eight months since the hurricane, over 30,000 residents still lack power, with blackouts occurring regularly. Just last month, an excavator downed a power line that caused an island-wide blackout.

The US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has approved less than half of the 1.1 million applications for assistance since the hurricane. Over 2,700 families remain in FEMA-sponsored short-term housing. Almost half the schools are still only functioning at 60 percent classroom capacity. Nearly 40,000 students have left Puerto Rico's schools since May 2017, either dropping out or starting school on the mainland.

These conditions have led to the needless death of thousands of workers and to the suffering of millions more. The financial scheming of the banks and corporations created a massive debt crisis that has enriched a handful of bankers and corporate CEOs. Barclays, which led the bond deal that directly created the debt, profited from the scheming to the tune of \$500 million; Banco Santander received \$99 million; JPMorgan, \$74 million; Morgan Stanley, \$24 million; among others. Now, the FOMB is demanding that the workers pay the price.

The lies propounded by both Democrats and Republicans, and supported by the parties of the Puerto Rican ruling class, that "there is no money" is insulting in the face of these numbers. It would take only a fraction of the money hoarded by the top .01 percent of

the population to rebuild the island's electrical grid, fund education, restore pensions and address the growing mental health crisis.

While these attacks were carried out at the behest of giant corporations and banks, workers and youth should have no illusions in the local government, including of the current governor, Ricardo Rosselló, who is nothing more than a stooge of Wall Street. Speaking at the governor's mansion after the protests, Governor Rosselló held up a rock he claimed had been thrown at police by protesters and proclaimed, "Freedom of expression cannot come at the expense of people's safety and well being." He made no mention of the safety of the thousands of people who are living without power or running water, or of the thousands of retirees who will not be able to afford housing or food with the cuts to their pensions, or of the hundreds of families who lost loved ones after the hurricane because of the lack of resources.

"This kind of violence damages the good name of Puerto Rico" he lamented, making clear where his interests lay. He went on to claim that the police had "no choice but to act" after a small group of agitators "hurled rocks and bottles" at them.



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