

Puerto Rico's teachers hold one-day strike

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Puerto Rico's public-school children started school on August 13, many crowding into crumbling school rooms or sitting in the open air. Two days later, their teachers walked out to protest the dire state of education and the government's plans, utilizing the pretext of Hurricane Maria, to privatize the territory's public schools.

The one-day strike was called by Puerto Rico Teachers' Federation (*Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico*, FMPR). It called attention to the threat to close almost a third of the island's schools—over 250—and Governor Ricardo Rosselló's wide-ranging attacks on education under his “reform” law signed in March.

Despite mass anger throughout the island over the state of the schools, the FMPR refused to call more than a one-day action. For its part, the Puerto Rico Teachers Association, known by its Spanish acronym AMPR, which has long claimed to be fighting privatization, refused to participate in the strike at all. President Aida Diaz told the media in late July, “Strikes are excellent when we have the chance to win, but it can also be a danger.” On August 3, the AMPR affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers.

As of the beginning of the school year, an estimated 7,000 teachers had been laid off, and adding to the chaos, of those who are returning to teach this year, more than 1,000 had not been notified where they would be assigned.

Students and teachers have voiced anger against closed schools and unrepaired buildings. Several schools whose buildings were relatively unscathed, including at least two for special needs children, were closed. One such school is the Lorencita Ramirez School in Toa Baja. Speaking to Radio Isla, one mother explained that her disabled daughter had first learned to speak at Lorencita Ramirez, but now would have no comparable school to attend.

“I worked for five months to get my daughter into this school, and now they want to close it,” she said. “There's just no way that I could have ever imagined that they could close this excellent school, and that I would be in this struggle. But when something is wrong, and it affects your child. ... Well, here I am. In the struggle.”

Damage to many operating schools is so extensive that children have been forced into half-day schedules. The Department of Education has shelled out nearly \$43,000 apiece for 200 notorious FEMA trailers to house students, while saying “there is no money” to keep schools open.

The day before classes began on the island, Puerto Rico Secretary of Education Julia Keleher and Rosselló appeared at a news conference announcing the opening of Puerto Rico's first charter school in the well-to-do town of Rio Piedras. They euphemistically referred to the school as an “Alliance” school. They have publicly called for at least 10 percent of schools to be turned into privately run charters.

In line with a conspiracy of edubusinesses, Wall Street bankers and the county's local elite, it appears that the education funding arriving from the mainland has being largely diverted to charter operations. Partnerships are also being created with island businesses such as Techno Innovators and Puma Energy.

Keleher has earned a special place in the ire of Puerto Rico's teachers. Hired by Governor Rosselló in December 2016 from a business consulting background, she has been advocating for the institution of charter schools, patterned after the post-Katrina privatization of New Orleans' schools, since before Hurricane Maria. Since Hurricane Maria, which claimed nearly 5,000 lives, she has repeatedly referred to the storm as an “opportunity.”

Speaking to CBS in July, Keleher said: “No one

wanted the storm. But I am not going to misspend the opportunity, pardon the pun, that I have to redirect these things that would have never been available to Puerto Rico. [Without the storm], I would have been short \$300 million. I wouldn't be able to do the things that I am going to be able to do for teachers and for kids."

Keleher is doing exactly what she was appointed to do. Privatization of Puerto Rico's public schools has been part of an overall program of austerity recommended by the hedge fund managers tasked with overseeing the territory's "economic recovery" in the face of unremitting exploitation by the financial elite and an 11-year recession. This "recovery" is to be accomplished by placing Puerto Rico's public properties, utilities and social programs at the mercy of private investors.

Puerto Rican teachers and workers have been forced to live through a great catastrophe with little to no assistance, while the banks and big businesses have cruelly taken advantage of Hurricane Maria to further loot the island. The unions, both the AFT-affiliated AMPR and the ostensibly more militant FMPR, seek to block any struggle in defense of education, preventing the unity of Puerto Rican workers with their brothers and sisters on the mainland, and tying teachers to the bankrupt capitalist system.

Throughout the spring, teachers have held protests, vigils and marches, repeatedly trying to find a means to fight. More than 1,000 San Juan teachers went on strike in March to protest budget cuts. The AMPR would not endorse those strikes either, publicly citing fears that the trade union would lose negotiating privileges.

Teachers protested again in May, joining wider May Day anti-austerity demonstrations in San Juan. Along with thousands of other protesters, teachers marched down Ponce de León Avenue, the center of San Juan's financial district, and spoke at rallies. As the demonstration wound down, police threw canisters of tear gas into the crowd and fired rubber bullets. Hundreds of protesters were hospitalized. The police arrested over 20 students who were specifically protesting the education budget.

The real allies of Puerto Rican teachers, youth and other workers are their fellow workers in the US and around the world. The Socialist Equality Party calls for the immediate implementation of a massive public

works program to rebuild the island, its schools and hospitals, and to ensure that every person has a safe and comfortable home.

We call for the immediate abolition of the debt of Puerto Rico accrued through decades of colonial oppression and parasitic and corrupt financial schemes. We call for the immediate expropriation of the wealth of the financial aristocracy to fund these demands.

The author also recommends:

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[10 February 2018]



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