

US Senate fails to restore sweeping cuts to food assistance for Puerto Rico

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Since a factional battle broke out between Democratic and Republican parties last weekend, the US Senate has failed to pass a disaster relief bill that allocates federal money to recovery projects in all areas of the country recently affected by fires, floods, tropical storms and other natural disasters. The failure to approve this funding has left more than a million Puerto Ricans with drastically-reduced food stamp payments, one year and seven months after Hurricanes Maria and Irma struck the US territory.

The island has faced a severe economic and social crisis for decades, especially after the 2008 recession. However, Hurricane Maria exacerbated the issues by shattering basic infrastructure like the electrical grid, hospitals, homes, highways and schools. An estimated 5,000 individuals died from the direct physical and social impacts of the storm, although the politicians in San Juan and Washington along with their media outlets accepted the ludicrously low initial death count of 64 for months. For many residents, 43.5 percent of whom live below the federal poverty line, daily life can still be a struggle, with power outages, health issues, and difficulty securing a job and education.

The slow progress is a direct result of the insufficient and stalled response of the US government, which has left the fate of the island's working class to the policies of the ultra-right Trump administration and the bitter conflicts in Congress over scraps they have left for urgent social needs.

As a result of the initial dispute over disaster relief that arose when the House passed the first Democratic Party-sponsored bill in January, the Trump administration and Puerto Rican officials slashed funding for food stamp programs, which initially affected 43 percent of recipients but have slowly spread to all recipients.

By early March, benefits fell by as much as 50 percent for the 1.4 million people out of a total 3.4 million residents who receive food stamp benefits, 300,000 of

whom signed up after Hurricane Maria. For those affected, that reduction means living off \$200 a month instead of \$400 a month.

According to data collection by Professor Hector Cordero-Guzman at the City University of New York, 55 percent of those who saw their benefits cut are children, the elderly and the disabled. Further, 42 percent are looking for work, 15 percent are working and another 17 percent cannot work due to school or family-related obligations. Statistics on federal health coverage programs run parallel to food programs, with 1.3 million residents currently covered by Medicaid.

The restoration of food assistance depends on the disaster relief bill currently in the US Senate, which voted down both the Democratic House bill and the Republican Senate bill on Monday, April 1. Each bill proposes over \$10 billion in aid to Puerto Rico and additional states that have been devastated by natural disasters over the previous year, including floods throughout the Midwest, California wildfires, Hurricane Florence on the East Coast and Hurricane Michael on the Gulf Coast.

Democrats blocked the Senate Republican version by a 44–49 vote, as it requires a minimum of 60 votes to pass. This version would have allocated a total of \$13.5 billion, with \$600 million going to Puerto Rico solely for nutritional assistance. Under the bill's conditions, no funds were assigned for flood protection and energy grid projects, which are essential for the island's recovery.

Senate Democrats led the opposition to the Republican bill due to insufficient aid assigned to Puerto Rico, while Republicans have defended their proposals through racist condemnations of the US territory as essentially a second-class portion of America.

President Trump has led the right-wing attacks on the island, suggesting in personal statements that it should not receive any aid due to poor mismanagement of resources by the local government. "Puerto Rico got far more

money than Texas & Florida combined,” Trump said in a Twitter tirade on Monday, “yet their government can’t do anything right, the place is a mess—nothing works.”

He defended his position that any government aid to the island should be limited to food stamps. With his usual nationalist rhetoric and ignorance, Trump made clear that the needs of US states come before Puerto Rico, referring to the island as a “place” that Democrats are prioritizing, decisions that are “taking dollars away from our Farmers” and those affected by disasters on the US mainland.

These statements, backed by many Republican senators and congressmen, are intended to mobilize the most backward, racist elements of the party’s base on the mainland against the “foreign,” Spanish-speaking population of the US territory.

For their part, the Democrats have sought to shift all the blame for the lack of attention and resources to Puerto Rico to the Republican Party. In an opinion piece for the *New York Daily News* on March 31 headlined, “What Trump owes Puerto Rico,” Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer blamed Senate Republicans and President Trump for being “cruel and nasty” as they prevent “American children and families” from having “every resource needed to fully recover and rebuild their lives and communities.”

However, the House Democrats’ version of the bill only offers around \$700 million more in relief aid for Puerto Rico. Further, they have focused their faux outrage on the nearly \$20 billion that has yet to be disbursed a year and a half after congressional approval, an amount that is completely inadequate to mitigate one of the worst natural disasters in US history.

In 2018 the Puerto Rican Government estimated the total cost for a full recovery would be \$139 billion, twelve times more than the \$11.2 billion it has received so far. The Trump administration has technically allocated \$41 billion to distribute “over the life of the disaster,” but this ambiguous time stamp serves as a cover for the US government to issue minimal funds to the island without promising that they will ever pay the full amount, which is already inadequate to cover the full costs of repairs and preventative measures.

The aid proposals from both right-wing parties of the American ruling class propose mere fractions of what will be required to fully restore the island and drastically improve the social and material infrastructure to prevent future disasters.

The assault on Puerto Rico began, first and foremost, with the Obama administration’s Promise Act—also

known as PROMESA (Puerto Rico Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Act)—which imposed an economic dictatorship over the island.

It established a non-elected Financial Oversight and Management Board that imposed severe austerity measures even before Hurricane Maria hit the island, as a “solution” to the island’s budget crisis. In the interests of the financial elite on Wall Street, the PROMESA oversight bodies made the Puerto Rican workers pay the full burden of the local government’s nearly \$72 billion debt, and later controlled the financial response to the hurricane.

Whatever their public pretensions, the Democratic Party has actively supported the US government’s depriving Puerto Rico of its resources and autonomy.

For their part, Puerto Rican politicians and financial executives are cooperative with the US government’s brutal assaults on the working class, or else don’t put up much of a fight against it. Though Governor Ricardo Rosselló and other prominent political figures often criticize the openly ignorant and criminal statements of Washington politicians, they agree with the basic ruling-class drive to open the workers and youth of Puerto Rico to the predatory exploitation of finance capital.

Natural disasters expose the problems inherent to the capitalist system, as the poor and working class is disproportionately burdened with the severe social crisis and loss of life, while the ruling class sees in this crisis an opportunity to exploit the population more ruthlessly. The working class of both Puerto Rico and the American mainland must reject the lies that there are no resources to rebuild every region impacted by natural disasters, not when trillions rest in the hands of corporations, banks and the stock markets.



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