Protests demanding resignation of governor continue in Puerto Rico

Rafael Azul
20 July 2019

Friday marked the seventh consecutive day of protests in Puerto Rico demanding the resignation of Governor Ricardo Roselló. Demonstrators began assembling in the early afternoon outside the governor's mansion, known as the "Fortress," and continued protesting until well into the night.

The eruption of mass protests involving at least 100,000 people thus far was sparked by the publication last week of hundreds of pages of internet chats between Roselló and top officials in the Democratic Party-aligned administration dating back to the end of 2018. The messages exposed their contempt for the working population and indifference to the continued suffering of millions on the island nearly two years after Hurricane Maria.

That storm and the lack of any serious response from either the Trump administration or the government of the commonwealth caused the deaths of 5,000 residents, mostly as a result of the loss of electrical power, drinkable water and livable houses. The storm compounded a pervasive and protracted social crisis in Puerto Rico resulting from the closure of industries, social cuts and the bleeding of the former US colony by US banks and hedge funds. The Obama administration set up the Financial Control Board to serve as Wall Street's instrument to insure the repayment of the island's debts by imposing brutal austerity measures.

Popular outrage was further inflamed by the exposure of widespread corruption in the Roselló administration. The recent revelations have forced the resignation of Education Secretary Julia Keleher and the public health director, Ángela Ávila. The two officials are accused of diverting a combined $15.5 million in federal funds to politically connected contractors. Keleher is particularly hated for using the hurricane as an opportunity to close scores of schools, lay off thousands of educators and privatize the education system. She is currently free on bail awaiting trial.

A total of six government officials and lobbyists have thus far been forced to resign as a result of the corruption revelations.

Friday's protest march and rally were organized by a trade union coalition, including UTIER, the electrical utility workers union. It was joined by university professors, teachers and non-teaching education workers, port workers and office and professional workers. Further demonstration are set for the weekend and Monday.

The unions, tied to the Democratic Party, are seeking to contain an explosive movement that threatens to topple the Roselló government and fuel social anger on the US mainland.

Teachers carried signs denouncing attacks by the Roselló administration on pension rights and the layoff of educators. Many of the demonstrators were laid off teachers.

Several demonstrators interviewed by the Televisa network indicated that they had marched every day since the protests began. Alex Manuel López, a small business owner, said: "We do not have the luxury of working for them to rob us of what we earn. We are sick and tired. We will be here for as long as it's necessary."

Also interviewed was songstress ILE, who collaborated with rappers Bad Bunny and Residente to produce the rap song "Sharpening Our Knives" against Roselló and his government. ILE called on musicians and artists to join the struggle.

The protest marches in San Juan and other cities increased in intensity during the week, including a particularly large protest on Monday and another one on Wednesday. On those days the police attacked demonstrators with rubber bullets, tear gas and pepper gas and arrested a number of people.

In solidarity with the Puerto Rican protests, demonstrations have also taken place across the United

© World Socialist Web Site

States. So far there have been demonstrations in Miami, New York, Denver, Chicago, San Francisco and Oakland, California. Globally, there have been protests in Vienna, Madrid and Barcelona.

The protests were triggered by the publication of 889 pages of political chats between the governor and his friends, using the Telegram app. The document was provided anonymously to, and made public by, San Juan's Center for Investigative Journalism.

In the chat room were Luis Rivera Marin, Roselló's secretary of state, Christian Sobrino, an economic adviser, Carlos Bermudez and Edwin Miranda, communications consultants, Interior Secretary Ricardo Llerandi, Public Affairs Secretary Anthony Maceira and Elias Sanchez, a former representative to the Financial Control Board.

The chats applaud acts of political persecution against the press and joke about the situation in which many victims of Hurricane María still find themselves. Many of the chats involve vulgar misogynistic and homophobic language. Roselló said of San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz, a critic aligned with the Bernie Sanders wing of the Democratic Party, "she's off her meds, either that or she is a tremendous HP" (daughter of a whore). Similarly vulgar, anti-gay and mocking language was used against other political figures, male and female.

The chats also provided confidential government information that was given to lobbyist Elías Sanchez Sifonte, a close crony of the governor. He is a former Roselló campaign manager and representative to the Financial Control Board. It is suspected that Sanchez is complicit in the steering of millions in federal funds to well-connected contractors through his wife's firm CDO Management.

President Donald Trump came to Rosselló's defense Thursday morning, tweeting that "the Governor is under siege … and the United States foolishly gave away 92 Billion Dollars for Hurricane relief, much of which was squandered away and wasted, never to be seen again." Trump's figure for disaster relief is a fiction. Out of the $42 billion earmarked for Puerto Rico, less than $14 billion has been spent.

So-called "progressive" Democrats such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have refused to take up the protesters' demand for Roselló's resignation. Ocasio-Cortez, who was born in Puerto Rico, said, "I have been kind of weighting that, but I absolutely think that his statements are unacceptable and would certainly undermine faith in that administration."

Sanders posed as a supporter of the demonstrators, while presenting the protests as a demand merely for "accountability and an end to corruption."

Helena, a retired professor at the University of Puerto Rico at Humacao, a city of 58,000 people on the east side of the island, told the *World Socialist Web Site*:

"The people suffered a lot during and after Hurricane Maria. They knew something was going on in the government because no aid was being delivered. Even today, nearly two years later, there are 20,000 homes on the island without proper roofs, where people are living with tarps over their heads. There are still people without electric power.

"In my town, the people suffered for more than nine months without electricity. We have a lot of old people, who depend on oxygen tanks that need to be recharged and other services that could not be delivered. We organized a protest on April 30, 2018 and were attacked by riot police, even though we were peaceful and a majority of people on the demonstration were old and sick.

"A lot of people in our neighborhood died needlessly because they lacked critical services. There were lines for meals, lines to get money out of the bank. It was really painful.

"When the 900 pages of chat messages came out, the people exploded. These people were sitting in air conditioned rooms and enjoying themselves. They were making fun of the people who were suffering.

"The big demonstrations have been held at the governor's house in Old San Juan, known as the 'Fortress'. But there have also been 15 or 20 demonstrations outside of San Juan. Last Wednesday we had a protest here in Humacao.

"The first point of the protests is the statement that the people do not recognize Rosselló as the governor. We are demanding that he vacate the 'fortress' and resign. The second demand is that the Financial Control Board leave the island and disband."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site