

Puerto Rican crisis deepens over Rosselló's replacement

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The crisis of rule in Puerto Rico deepened on Sunday when Puerto Rico's Secretary of Justice, Wanda Vázquez, second in line to replace Governor Ricardo Rosselló, declined the appointment in a Twitter message. Rosselló announced his resignation from the governorship on July 24, following twelve days of mass popular protests. The governor's resignation is to take effect on this Friday, August 2.

With the rats deserting the sinking ship of the Puerto Rican government, the office of secretary of state—first in line of succession—was vacant. Last Friday, Rosselló met with Vázquez at the Fortaleza presidential palace to discuss an “orderly transition.”

It soon became plain, however, that her appointment would reignite the massive demonstrations that brought roughly a million people into the streets. No sooner was she mentioned as a replacement for governor than Twitter hashtags demanding Rosselló's ouster were replaced with that of #WandaRenuncia (Wanda Resign).

She herself is under investigation both for influence peddling and for stonewalling any investigations into charges of rampant corruption within the Rosselló administration. While treating the island's top politicians and their business cronies with kid gloves, she doggedly pursued the punitive prosecution of student demonstrators.

On Monday, over 1,000 demonstrators gathered outside of her offices in San Juan chanting slogans not only rejecting her as governor, but demanding that she resign her post as secretary of justice.

The collapse of Vázquez's candidacy has opened up a widening constitutional crisis for Puerto Rico's regime, with the next in line for the governorship, Francisco Parés, the treasury secretary, being too young to take office. This leads to the fourth in line, Education Secretary Eligio Hernández, an interim appointment made by Rosselló after his predecessor resigned amid mounting evidence of corruption.

Speculation has mounted that Rosselló will appoint a hand-picked replacement to the office of secretary of state, the first in line to replace the governor. The most mentioned names are those of Senate President Thomas Rivera Schatz and Resident Commissioner Jenniffer González, Puerto Rico's non-voting representative to the US House, both members of Rosselló's New Progressive Party (PNP in Spanish) as well as Trump's mainland Republican Party. It is clear that, like Wanda Vázquez, none of these right-wing candidates are acceptable to the Puerto Rican

masses that overthrew Rosselló.

The US government and Wall Street, meanwhile, are teaming up in an attempt to exploit the upheavals in Puerto Rico and the public exposure of the rampant corruption in the island's government to further deepen the attacks on the Puerto Rican people.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) last week announced plans to further restrict Puerto Rico's access to funds for repairing hurricane damage. Under the new regulations formal approval from the agency based on documented requests from the government in San Juan will be required for release of any aid throughout the island. The measure, a punitive action being carried out on the pretext of combating corruption, will further slow down recovery efforts that have proceeded at a snail's pace.

While there are roughly 10,000 hurricane-damaged schools, bridges and other infrastructure spread across Puerto Rico—nearly two years after the ravages of Hurricane Maria—as of last week, FEMA had approved funding for just nine projects.

Meanwhile, the the Financial Oversight and Management Board (FOMB), popularly known as *la junta*, is preparing to exploit the crisis of the government in San Juan to tighten its dictatorial grip over the island's budget in order to squeeze out payments on its reputed public debt of over \$70 billion. Before the outbreak of mass protests it had reportedly finalized a global budget plan for draconian cuts to funding for public healthcare, pensions and every basic service, and for public education, including the University of Puerto Rico where tuition is to rise.

These policies have been pursued uninterruptedly since the appointment of the financial oversight board under the Obama administration as part of the so-called PROMESA act (Puerto Rico Oversight Management and Economic Stability Act). PROMESA placed economic management of the island in the hands of an unelected board, accountable only to the banks and to Wall Street hedge and vulture funds, the holders of Puerto Rican debt accumulated through criminal lending practices.

These reactionary efforts have been fully supported by the Rosselló administration, which in November 2017, two months after Hurricane Maria struck (destroying more than 70,000 homes, together with the large part of the electric infrastructure, water supply, bridges and roads), asked for the unilateral authority to take drastic measures to “reorganize, externalize, consolidate, and suppress agencies, programs and services of the Executive branch,” leaving little doubt that these dictatorial powers would be

used to subordinate the island to the bondholders and vulture funds. The aim was to slash government expenditures by \$2.75 billion annually, and reduce the number of public agencies from 130 to 35.

Fully in line with this brutal austerity plan, Wanda Vázquez commented at the time that the 130 public agencies were “unnecessary.”

The mass protests in San Juan, other Puerto Rican cities and in many cities in the United States and Europe were triggered by the publication on July 13 of chats between Governor Rosselló and some of his political allies. The chats, consisting of 899 pages, were published by the San Juan based Center for Investigative Journalism (*Centro de Periodismo Investigativo*, CPI). They combined vulgar insults against individual Puerto Ricans with obscene contempt and indifference toward the victims of Hurricane Maria. They also revealed a web of corruption and insider self-dealing with Rosselló at its center.

The release of the chats took place at a very inopportune time for the Rosselló administration, already reeling from the arrest three days earlier by federal agents of the former head of the Health Insurance Administration, Ángela Ávila, and Education Secretary Julia Keleher and her assistant Glenda Ponce-Mendoza, together with a group of crooked contractors. They have been accused by a federal grand jury of fraud, money laundering and conspiracy to commit fraud and steal money.

Before her arrest, Keleher was one of the key individuals involved in Rosselló’s plans to dismantle public education through the shutdown of hundreds of public schools and the promotion of for-profit charter schools. Both Keleher and Rosselló saw in Hurricane Maria the opportunity for accelerating this retrograde project.

The death toll attributable to that storm, which hit Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017, originally estimated at 64 by the Rosselló administration has since been revised to as high as 5,740 people. Many demonstrators in the protests that led up to Rosselló’s resignation carried signs bearing the number 4,645, an estimate based on a Harvard study. Nobody on the island accepts the government’s current estimate of 2,975.

Popular outrage was triggered in particular by a vicious joke by Rosselló’s chief financial officer who, referring to the bodies that piled up at the island’s morgues, wrote, “Now that we are on the subject, don’t we have some cadavers to feed our crows?”

As the cynical leaked chats also demonstrated, much of the already insufficient FEMA aid to the island was detoured into the hands of corrupt politicians, shady contractors and debt-holders. All of this took place under the supposedly strict regime of the federal oversight board, which is itself staffed by connected politicians and agents of the banks who reserve austerity measures for the working class, while turning a blind eye to kickbacks and bribes for inflated contracts signed by connected officials.

The release of the leaked chats amounted to setting a match to an already existing powderkeg. What brought unprecedented masses into the streets were all the grievances that have built up over more than a dozen years of relentless economic decline, compounded by the hurricane’s ravages and the criminal policies of the governments in both Washington and San Juan.

Both governments are desperate to bring an end to the mass mobilizations. Both the Trump administration and the Democratic Party fear that the powerful mobilization of Puerto Rican workers and youth, in which for the first time in the history of the US and its semi-colonial territories a sitting governor was forced out by a mass movement from below, could serve as an example for workers on the mainland. The obvious question is, if this can be done in San Juan, why not in Washington?

Also anxious to bring the mass mobilizations to an end is the trade union bureaucracy. The Puerto Rican daily *El Nuevo Día* published interviews over the weekend with both United Federations of Teachers President Randi Weingarten and the head of the union’s Puerto Rican affiliate, the Asociación de Maestros de Puerto Rico, Aida Díaz, purporting to welcome the downfall of Rosselló.

Weingarten counseled Puerto Rican working people that it was “time to get beyond the rancor and division that his administration created,” while Díaz declared that “the important thing is to rebuild and go forward, hoping that our next leaders will be sensible and put Puerto Rico above any political or personal interest.”

What nonsense! These union bureaucrats are determined to do their utmost to suppress the class struggle. The mass uprising of the Puerto Rican people was presaged by the rejection by Puerto Rican teachers of an agreement promoted by the union that subordinated their interests to the demands of the financial oversight board. As for “hoping” that Rosselló’s successor will place Puerto Rico first, there is not a chance that the collection of reactionaries being considered for governor will do anything of the kind.

Resolving the profound social grievances over inequality and attacks on basic social and democratic rights is possible only by means of the broadest mobilization of the working class, in unity with workers in the mainland US and internationally, to put an end to capitalism.



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