

Puerto Rican governor steps down as political crisis escalates

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3 August 2019

On Friday, demonstrators once again filled the streets outside of Puerto Rico's governor's residence, called the "Fortress," to celebrate the ouster of Governor Ricardo Rosselló and oppose the installation of his successor. One of the many signs read, "You bring corruption, the people, revolution."

At 5 p.m., without leaving the building, surrounded by dozens of heavily armed police, Rosselló published a statement transferring the governorship to his newly nominated secretary of state, Pedro Pierluisi.

Mass demonstrations in Puerto Rico ousted a sitting governor for the first time in the US territory's history, or for that matter, in the history of the United States. Protests grew continuously for two weeks until more than half a million out of a population of 3.2 million people marched on July 22 in downtown San Juan. Two days later, Governor Rosselló announced that he would resign on August 2 at 5 p.m.

Friday's unprecedented transition of power was dominated by extreme nervousness within the island's ruling establishment, fearing an even larger social explosion.

Two hours after being named governor, with a wait-and-see approach regarding the popular response to his unconstitutional installation, Pierluisi accepted the appointment at a press conference where he called for "unity" and declared that "we don't want a constitutional crisis."

Pierluisi is a puppet of the US capitalist interests responsible for the social crisis on the island. He resigned only three days ago from the main law firm representing the Financial Oversight and Management Board (FOMB), a federal agency created by the Obama administration and popularly known as the *Junta*, which has functioned as a financial dictatorship over the island to oversee its plundering by Wall Street.

The crowd in San Juan, which continued to peacefully demonstrate in a celebratory mood late into the night on Friday, began chanting, "Pierluisi, resign, and take the *Junta* with you!" One sign carried by a demonstrator read, "No to

the coup by the *Junta* and Pierluisi."

At the same time, the Trump administration and the parasitic financial aristocracy for which it speaks have sought to exploit the crisis to escalate the attacks on living standards and impose greater austerity. On Thursday, the White House announced that it would suspend the transfer of \$8 billion as part of natural disaster aid due to "political unrest and financial irregularities." Last week, the *Wall Street Journal* called for the FOMB to "impose discipline" and end "handouts."

In this context, the nomination of another political agent of Wall Street, far from providing a new political equilibrium, heralds a head-on clash between the popular movement against austerity and the FOMB and US imperialism. The aggressive response by the Trump administration constitutes a warning to the working class and youth in Puerto Rico and the US as a whole that preparations are being made to use the full force of the American state to crush an escalating social explosion.

Above all, the greatest danger is posed by the lack of a clear program and the absence of a political leadership and organization independent of the two corporate-controlled parties in the United States and their representatives in Puerto Rico. The Democratic Party and its trade union and political agents in Puerto Rico are working to politically disarm and suppress the protests, chiefly by creating illusions in the anti-democratic maneuvers within the rotten and colonial Puerto Rican political set-up.

Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, for instance, tweeted Friday night: "The Puerto Rican people... showed us what ordinary people can achieve when we organize. Our job now is to make sure they get fair and responsive representation. Puerto Rico deserves democracy, not austerity." Absent from his remarks was any call for the dissolution of the FOMB bankers' dictatorship, the central demand of the demonstrators.

On Friday, the Puerto Rican House of Representatives held a hearing and vote to confirm Pierluisi as secretary of state, the office that is first in line for succession to the

governorship. This rushed procedure ended with a “yes” vote at about 4 p.m., one hour before the deadline for Rosselló’s removal. But the president of the Puerto Rican Senate, Thomas Rivera Schatz, who also has gubernatorial aspirations, postponed that body’s hearing until next Wednesday.

Debate raged among media commentators and legislators—and within the White House, where the final decision was undoubtedly made—on whether to carry out the extra-constitutional installation of Pierluisi as an interim governor or tap Justice Secretary Wanda Vázquez, the next in line for succession, who had refused until yesterday to accept the governorship.

Triggering Puerto Rico’s mass protests, the July 13 publication by the Center for Investigative Journalism (CPI) of leaked online chats involving Rosselló and his close associates exposed not only their abject servility to Wall Street, but also the contempt toward the Puerto Rican working class of the entire ruling elite.

It tapped into a groundswell of social anger after decades of deteriorating social conditions, leading to demands not only for Rosselló’s exit, but that of the entire political establishment. The Twitter hashtag trending among Puerto Ricans on Friday was #niSchatzNiPierluisiNiWanda (neither Schatz, Pierluisi nor Wanda).

On top of jokes about dead victims from Hurricane Maria, homophobic and misogynistic insults, attacks on journalists and a statement about shooting political opponents, the leaks also revealed evidence of a vast corruption ring. CPI has focused its exposures on Elías Sánchez Sifonte, a former government representative to the FOMB and lobbyist, whose clients include Microsoft, Walgreens and other major corporations. The leaked texts show him receiving confidential information and giving policy orders to Rosselló and his clique.

While not involved in the leaked texts, Pierluisi, if anything, is more criminal than Rosselló. In 1993, he became secretary of justice for one term under Rosselló’s father and then joined the law firm O’Neill & Borges LLC, where he remained for 11 years. Between 2008 and 2016, he served as resident commissioner (Puerto Rico’s non-voting member of the US Congress), only to return to the same law firm as an advisor to the FOMB.

As commissioner, he promoted the bill that created the FOMB, while his wife, whose brother is the chairman of the *Junta*, got rich through a consulting business that advises vulture funds on how to profit off of Puerto Rico’s fiscal crisis. The couple left Washington with 27 times the wealth they possessed when they arrived.

For their part, Rivera Schatz and Vázquez have both been accused of influence peddling and kickbacks for

concessions.

The entire political establishment, including the local legislature as well as the federal authorities, have been exposed as entirely subordinated to the dictates of the US financial elite and hostile to the social and democratic rights of Puerto Rico’s workers and oppressed.

A study by Harvard’s Chan School of Public Health estimated that 5,740 people died as a result of Hurricane Maria in September 2017. When President Donald Trump visited the island a month after the storm, he claimed there had been no “real catastrophe.” The hurricane had destroyed 70,000 homes, left only 5 percent of the electric grid operating and only one fully functional hospital out of 69 on the island. Damage totaled more than \$139 billion, according to local authorities.

CBS News reported that as of this past April the federal government had delivered only \$11.2 billion in aid to Puerto Rico.

BuzzFeed News reported last October that the Rosselló government had given a green light for funeral homes to cremate at least 911 corpses piling up after the hurricane, without any medical examination. Rosselló’s chief financial officer joked in one of the leaked texts, “Now that we are on the subject, don’t we have some cadavers to feed our crows?”

It was Puerto Rico’s legislature, now feigning moral indignation over the leaked messages, that approved the “New Government of Puerto Rico Act” three months after Hurricane Maria, exploiting the devastation to grant Rosselló sweeping powers aimed at “consolidating” 118 government agencies into 35, while cutting \$2.75 billion in annual costs to service the island’s \$74 billion debt.

According to the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, up to 17,000 US troops were at one point deployed to Puerto Rico and the neighboring US Virgin Islands after the entire federal intervention was placed under the US military’s Northern Command.

Despite the pittance of aid sent by Washington, hampered by private, for-profit deals that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) signed for provision of diesel fuel, gasoline and water, the massive military deployment failed to deliver it. AFP published aerial images Tuesday of tens of thousands of water bottles in a vacant field a few miles from San Juan.



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