

”We don’t trust any government institution”

Puerto Ricans speak out against government corruption as earthquake disaster unfolds

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Little more than two years since Hurricane Maria, the population of the island of Puerto Rico has been pushed to the brink as a swarm of earthquakes continues to hit the southern part of the U.S. territory. The earthquakes that began December 28—coming against the backdrop of immense social inequality, deep poverty, and decades of punishing austerity—have exposed that nothing has been done to make the population whole after the disaster caused by Maria killed as many as 5,000 people.

A powerful 6.4 magnitude earthquake, the largest to hit the island in 100 years, briefly knocked out power to the entire island, cut off access to water for tens of thousands for several days and caused hundreds of homes and other structures to collapse.

The damage is concentrated in the south around Ponce, the second largest city of the island. In this region, families have been sleeping outside their homes or in makeshift encampments in town centers and parking lots. If their homes haven’t collapsed already, residents fear their homes will crumble as the aftershocks continue in the coming weeks. Residents of Guanica have taken to sleeping in their cars and tents on the top of a mountain in an effort to escape danger from collapsing homes or rockslides if another quake hits.

Amid the frightening circumstances that have all residents on edge, there is a widespread understanding that local politicians, the US government, and major aid organizations will not be of any help.

Reporters with the *World Socialist Web Site* have been speaking with workers, young people, and other residents about the situation.

Angela lives in Caguas, a town in the northeastern region of the island. While she has not witnessed the severe damage of the south, she has “tried to keep abreast of what is happening. It is a very difficult thing, because unlike a hurricane, there is no way to predict when the next earthquake will be. That is why there are people who have

chosen to sleep outside. Others are sleeping outside because they lost their residences.”

“These people need help,” Angela continued, “and the rest of the island joined to take them supplies. After the fiasco of government aid after [Hurricane] Maria, we don’t trust any government institution.”

Major highways and roadways continue to be packed with cars, as residents drive from the northern and central regions to the south, bringing necessities like food, water, hygiene products, clothes, and blankets. Puerto Ricans from the US mainland have been flying to the island with bags full of supplies to join in self-organized aid missions.

As one example, Carlos and his wife—both originally from Puerto Rico but currently living in Florida where they run a cigar shop—have organized a fundraising campaign and used their own money to fly necessities to the island and bring them to the residents in the southern part of the island.

The wife explained to the WSWs, “We have family out there. That’s one reason we are doing this. My husband is a military veteran and has never stopped wanting to give back, especially to our people.

“This was very close to home much like when Hurricane Maria happened, and it was harder to help for us, at least back then. So this time around we wanted to give back as much as we could and help in any way we could. We didn’t have a lot of supplies because it was just us. But any little bit helps.” She concluded, “This has been so heartbreaking.”

Carlos is currently on the island, posting video updates on their business’s Instagram account. His updates give a sense of the dire need on the island, with residents of Guyanilla in need of medical attention going to a pop-up medical clinic set up by a local doctor who has volunteered his time. Carlos commented on one of his videos, “It’s sad out here. The people are mentally exhausted.”

“All of my family and friends here and in the mainland are worried, stressed out,” an early retiree from the sales industry, Raul, told the WSWs. “I too am dealing with

anxiety over the earthquakes. I live in Guayana, and my house was shaken several times. Most of my neighbors are elderly, and I fear for their wellbeing.”

“The government’s lack of response is not surprising,” Raul noted. “Trump hasn’t mentioned the disaster here since it started. We are third-class citizens and are treated as such by the US government. They don’t care about us.”

Considering the reasons for the continued devastation and lack of response after Hurricane Maria and today, Raul pointed to “the lobbyists influencing San Juan, the back-room deals. The governor’s office makes deals that benefit the lenders, and the costs are passed on to the people for decades to come.”

“We are being squeezed for every penny. The sales tax is 11.5 percent!” Raul went on, “Most of the doctors have left, the police do not respond to calls, the mayors won’t see their constituents. The electric company raised their rates again, but they never fix the grid. The money goes to their pockets. The pharmaceutical companies set up shop here and pay zero taxes. They don’t give local people the good-paying jobs. How can the government think that [this] helps the island?”

When this reporter brought up the roots of the corruption within the whole capitalist system, which organizes society to benefit a small capitalist minority at the expense of human and environmental needs, and that Puerto Ricans share the experience of being abandoned after natural disasters with poor people across the US and internationally, Raul said, “I agree 100%!!”

“This can’t continue, the younger people are waking up to the corruption both here and in D.C. The sleeping Taino [the indigenous people of Puerto Rico] is slowly waking up and is going to be very unhappy. We’re one of the oldest colonies on earth. The older generations were complacent with our government. Today’s younger people are not going to be so patient.”

After participating in the mass protest in Puerto Rico last July, which brought down Governor Ricky Rosello and threatened to oust his replacement and current governor Wanda Vasquez, Raul has been carefully following the protests erupting around the world. “I’m very proud of the protests in Hong Kong. They took a page from Puerto Rico’s protest,” he said.

Coral, a student at the University of Puerto Rico, said that she has been following the news and hearing stories from friends about the impact of the earthquakes. “Most of the damage to infrastructure is visibly located in the south area of Puerto Rico, but we must say that Puerto Rican infrastructure in general is doubtfully up to seismic codes.”

In fact, it’s estimated that 70 percent of all buildings on the island were constructed before seismic standards were

set in the 1980s. The percentage of unfit buildings is even higher in the public school system.

“Regarding the rest of us here in Puerto Rico,” Coral explained, “the psychological damage is very real. Most of us have not slept well in more than a week because of the anxiety of the constant earthquakes.”

Coral noted that she had attended the anti-government protests last summer. “It was sort of a wakeup call here in Puerto Rico,” she said. “It was very intense and empowering for people who feel we cannot provoke change just by speaking up. A beautiful experience. I believe this has strengthened Puerto Ricans...[contributing] to believing in ourselves and building even more resilience.

“The massive community efforts to provide the south with supplies, food, beds, and more...all come from this sense of community that Maria and summer of 2019 created, but also from the huge lack of trust of us Puerto Ricans in the local and foreign government relief efforts post-Hurricane Maria.

“We saw how supplies, food and water were never delivered by the government, local and federal, even when they already had these supplies.” In some cases, “the delivery of these supplies was also delayed because of politicians wanting to use photos of them personally delivering supplies for their campaign.”

Referring to the current debt of \$70 billion the island has accrued at the hands of various financial vultures, Coral stated firmly, “We believe that most of this debt is caused by corrupt politicians, and we have never seen the changes in education, health and infrastructure that the money was supposed to be used for. The people have endlessly requested to audit this debt, not by the government, but by the working people of Puerto Rico themselves, rather than just sending la Junta de Control Fiscal [a popular jab at the Financial Control Board set up by the Obama administration in 2016] to just dismantle what’s left of our island in order to pay the debt.”



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