

Notes from Puerto Rico: Earthquakes and government indifference leave trail of social destruction

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Reporters from the World Socialist Web Site recently visited the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico, in the wake of a series of powerful earthquakes that rocked the island starting December 28. The firsthand descriptions are an account of daily life in the southern region of the island as well as commentary from Puerto Rican workers and youth on the ecological, political and social crises unfolding on the island. Further interviews and other material from their trip will be published in the coming days.

The working class in Puerto Rico has been living in a state of extreme anxiety since December 28, when a string of massive earthquakes began to rock the island, including a 6.4 magnitude quake on Tuesday, January 7—the largest quake to hit Puerto Rico in over 100 years— and a 5.9 on Sunday, January 12, among other continuing seismic activity and powerful aftershocks.

“The *sismos* [earthquakes] have just kept going and going. We are not sure when they will stop,” commented one resident of Yauco.

The earthquakes have been concentrated in the southern part of the island near the island’s second-largest city of Ponce. The towns which have been directly impacted include Yauco, Guanilla, Guanica, Laja and many of the surrounding areas.

For the affected region, the aftershocks from major earthquakes have been nearly constant, occurring once every couple hours. Humans can sense an earthquake at a magnitude of 3.0. They become unnerving at 4.0, frightening at 5.0 and terrifying at 6.0 and above.

Nearly everyone in the southern region has a nightmare story from the night the first quake hit the island. People reported being woken up in the late hours to a violent shaking of their beds, floors and walls—so much so that they could hardly take a step forward without being knocked down.

“I was woken up in the middle of the night with everything shaking,” said Marisa, a public-sector worker

who lives with her two children. “Every time I tried getting out of bed, I would fall over. It was so scary because I didn’t know where my children were, or if I could reach them and protect them. I didn’t know if I could make it out in time if anything crashed.”

We heard dozens of other stories of family members frantically attempting to grab elderly relatives and children in the middle of the quakes, attempting to move everyone safely outside, where they waited in fear to see if more tremors were to come.

Those located in the impacted area live in a constant state of fear. Residents reported feelings of immense anxiety, repeatedly asking themselves: Will another earthquake hit? Where will I and my family be? How can I get to safety from the grocery store or the park? What if my house collapses? Will the children be all right?

Fear and uncertainty were laced through every person’s story. In the capital city San Juan, an Uber driver shared how the major earthquake on January 6 had shaken her house early in the morning. She explained that she now worries every night if another one will hit and worries even more for the lives of those in the south.

A young man from Guanica said the earthquakes caused his neighborhood to be evacuated. Due the damage caused by the earthquake, his employers at an agricultural farm laid everyone off. With his neighborhood gone and his job indefinitely suspended, he had no idea what his future would hold.

“My son and daughter, along with my grandchildren, have come to stay here until late into the night for us to be together during the past few weeks,” said Berta Gonzalez, the grandmother of a family living in a small house just outside of Yauco. She told us that her thoughts were dominated by fear: fear of further earthquakes; fear that the house could collapse; fear that they could lose access to water, food, and other essentials; and fear that her family would struggle and suffer.

The family has not showered for days at a time since the quakes began because they fear having to run out of the house naked, possibly slipping or being injured if an earthquake hit at that moment. The family's grandmother and father slept on sofas near the front door for a quick escape route. "The smaller earthquakes are no problem now," explained Berta, "but when a larger one hits in the evening, it is so hard to sleep. I have to take my sleeping pills and count on my family to wake me up if needed."

Families have almost universally taken to keeping emergency bags packed close to the door.

Many family members who usually live in their own homes have packed into whichever relative's home was most likely to survive the tremors. Often this is a precautionary move, but many were forced to move due to being evacuated from unsafe structures or having their homes destroyed. Berta's son Ronaldo told us, "An older woman just moved in with her son next door. Her house was destroyed by the earthquakes in southern Yauco."

While the situation is quite severe in Yauco, it is even worse in Guanica. The small town has been hit the hardest by the seismic shakes, being located much closer to the epicenter of the highest-magnitude quakes. Residents of Yauco who recently visited the area or knew people who lived there described terrible scenes of building after building damaged, collapsed and evacuated.

Approximately 8,000 people were forced to seek refuge in large stadiums, coliseums, churches, open grassy fields and parking lots, many of them makeshift.

The roads everywhere are decrepit, and the walls on buildings—such as schools, government offices, homes and restaurants—have large cracks from the quakes. Many older buildings, constructed before the seismic codes of the 1980s, were built from brick and later plastered in cement. These buildings are the most at risk of damage and collapse.

One of the most revealing aspects of the damage, however, is that one has a difficult time differentiating between the destruction caused by Hurricane Maria, which hit in 2017, and the recent earthquakes. In the rubble of the collapsed homes, it is common to see a blue tarp that was previously serving as a roof for those homes severely damaged during the 2017 hurricane.

It is universally understood by workers throughout the island that neither the local government nor the federal government has any intention of providing the necessary resources for recovery.

As is so common nowadays, almost all of the aid and support has come from other workers in the north of the island who knew nothing would be done for those stuck in the south. Hundreds of workers came in droves, bringing water, food, diapers, soap and other necessities. Truck after

truck drove every day, despite the dangers involved.

Families told us that they had received multiple donations a day from these "spontaneous" aid missions, which included things like bags of sandwiches, beans, rice, water, soap, toothbrushes, diapers, baby food and feminine hygiene products. Not a single family we spoke with had received aid from official government programs or aid organizations. The only mention of FEMA came from a 31-year-old man, who explained that FEMA representatives came to his house to tell him to evacuate, never to be seen again.

Three weeks after the first quake hit, a video went viral on social media of a warehouse in Ponce full of unused emergency aid from Hurricane Maria, confirming what was already well known to the residents. Despite the response of current Governor Wanda Vazquéz to shift the blame from herself to other officials, workers who have been following events—and most have—understand that it is all political officials who are incriminated by the evidence.

Now, a month since the first quake hit the island, political officials on the island have yet to launch even the pretense of a full-scale recovery program.

The New Progressive Party (PNP) of ousted governor Ricky Rosselló and Vazquéz, the Popular Democratic Party (PPD) and the so-called "opposition" of the Puerto Rican Independence Party have no base of popular support in any significant section of the population. They have proved incapable of handling the disaster, in no small part because they bear responsibility for the crisis that has unfolded.

The class tensions are coming to a breaking point on the island. The mass protests in July that overthrew Governor Rosselló and his first successor, and now the renewed calls for Governor Vazquéz to resign, are an expression of the immense opposition among workers that exists on the island.



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