

Puerto Rico holds elections for new governor

Julio Patron
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Although residents of Puerto Rico are denied the right to vote for the US president and have no voting representatives in the US Congress, elections took place in the US territory last Tuesday for governor as well as legislative and mayoral posts, along with ballot initiatives. The results, which reveal a sharp decline in votes for the two main parties and an increase in third-party votes, reflect the growing distrust and contempt Puerto Ricans rightly have toward the entire political establishment.

Pedro Pierluisi of the New Progressive Party (PNP) won the election with less than 33 percent of the vote, beating Carlos Delgado of the Popular Democratic Party (PPD), who received nearly 32 percent, by barely 17,000 votes.

Voter turnout was very low for the island, with only 51 percent of the population participating. Significantly, for the first time since the establishment of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico in 1949, neither of the two main bourgeois parties, the PNP and the PPD, received over 40 percent of the vote, and neither will have a majority in the legislature. Third-party candidates received, as a whole, over a third of the vote for governor, almost doubling their share from the 2016 election.

Puerto Rico also voted on the issue of statehood, with 52 percent voting in favor, and nearly 48 percent voting against. The vote has been cast multiple times in the past and is binding neither on the island's nor the US government. However Puerto Ricans vote, the decision as to whether Puerto Rico is admitted as a state rests with the US Congress, which has shown no inclination to pursue the matter. The vote therefore is essentially meaningless. The issue of whether Puerto Rico should remain a Commonwealth (PDD) or become the 51st state (PNP)—and in previous referendums whether it should seek national independence—has long served as a means of diverting intense class and social conflicts

into safe political channels.

The new governor, Pedro Pierluisi, was involved in the corruption scandal that ignited mass protests in 2019, in which one-third of the island's population took to the streets and overthrew Governor Ricardo Rosselló, also a member of the PNP.

Pierluisi was Puerto Rico's non-voting member of the US Congress between 2009 and 2017. His brother-in-law was the chairman of the Financial Oversight Management Board (FOMB), popularly known as the *junta*, which oversees the island's economy in the interests of Wall Street creditors. During his eight years in Washington, his wife ran a firm providing advice to vulture funds on how best to loot the island's economy, and the couple increased their personal wealth 27-fold.

Before 2009, Pierluisi had worked 11 years for the law firm O'Neill & Borges LLC, whose top client became the FOMB. Pierluisi then returned to the firm to work as the junta's top legal advisor.

In July 2019, private messages exchanged between Rossello, Pierluisi, and other officials were made public, exposing discussions of hiding emergency supplies, attempting to cover up the negligence of local politicians, and jokes about shutting down public utilities, dead Hurricane Maria victims and even killing political opponents. Pierluisi, who was briefly installed as governor after Rosselló stepped down, was himself ousted only five days later in the face of continuing mass protests, after which current Governor Wanda Vázquez came to power.

Pierluisi is widely despised by Puerto Rican workers and youth, and the election results do not reflect popular support. Rather, the vast majority of people either did not vote at all or voted against him, including for third-party candidates, who themselves benefited from the radicalization of workers and youth and aimed to keep the population tied to the ruling establishment.

Puerto Rico has been engulfed in a series of political,

economic and social crises which have left the island in shambles, most recently intensified by the coronavirus pandemic and natural disasters.

Earlier this year, the island faced a string of earthquakes which damaged an already crumbling infrastructure, including schools and homes. In the face of the negligence and indifference of the Puerto Rican government, hundreds of workers from the northern region of the island, which was less impacted by the earthquakes, took it upon themselves to go to the south of the island with emergency aid for residents, bringing water, food and hygienic supplies. There has been no assistance for workers who have lost their homes, and many schools throughout the island are still closed.

Puerto Rico's elections took place amid record-breaking daily reported cases of COVID-19. The pandemic has been allowed to spread by the malign neglect of the Puerto Rican government. Wanda Vázquez Garced, the outgoing governor of Puerto Rico, began reopening the economy in September.

Puerto Rico hit an all-time high for daily recorded cases in the last two months, reporting over 1,000 new cases several days a week, with a current average of 772 cases a day. There are over 72,000 cases and nearly 900 deaths on the island as of this writing.

Even before the pandemic, the health care system in Puerto Rico had been decimated by underfunding, which has led doctors, nurses and other health care workers to leave the island over the years, creating the conditions for mass deaths due to COVID-19.

The real issues confronting the working class on the island, such as decaying infrastructure, the health care crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and immense poverty, will not be addressed within the confines of the existing political establishment. The only way out of the crisis is through the independent mobilization of the Puerto Rican working class against the capitalist system, uniting with workers on the mainland and internationally in the struggle for socialism.



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