

Puerto Rico: Teachers strikes and protests continue against debt payment deal

Rafael Azul
14 February 2022

A powerful movement of Puerto Rican teachers and public employees is defying the Financial Oversight and Management Board (FOMB) which controls the island's finances. Teachers are demanding the right to keep their existing pensions, as well as wage increases, the cancellation of school closures, increases in the Education Budget, and an end to the privatization of education and other public agencies.

Two weeks ago, Puerto Rican teachers launched demonstrations across the island, a colonial territory of the US. Teachers rallied at their schools in San Juan, Bayamon, San Germán, Guayanilla, Camuy, Lares and Juana Díaz. Hundreds of teachers also marched and rallied at the Fortaleza government house in San Juan, the capital.

The protests were held in opposition of the debt agreement reached between Puerto Rico and the Wall Street debt supervisory board, approved by federal judge Laura Taylor Swain.

The agreement freezes pensions for public school teachers and modifies the defined benefits plan that grants teachers 75 percent of their final wages. The new plan is solely based on deductions from teachers' wages into a retirement account tied to financial markets.

Prior to this agreement, teachers were eligible for full retirement after completing 30 years on the job no matter how old they were. Under the new agreement, the age of retirement has been set at 63, meaning educators who begin their careers in their twenties would have to teach far longer than 30 years to retire with a full pension.

The fiscal agreement contemplates a \$470 increase in monthly wages only if teachers and students meet recently imposed attendance requirements for students and teachers. Currently, there is an exodus of teachers

fleeing the widespread poverty on the island, many being actively recruited by school districts in Florida, Texas, and other US states.

On February 2, the Financial Oversight Board rejected a plan to raise monthly base salaries from \$1,750 to \$2,700, under conditions of sky-rocketing housing, food, and fuel prices. Many educators spend their days teaching and work nights and weekends at other jobs. In addition, teachers report that they often buy classroom supplies out of their own pockets as a consequence of previous cuts in the public education budget.

In addition to the attacks on pensions and wages, anger is being fueled by a new round of school closings. Education authorities had promised in May 2021 that no schools would close, but have now issued a "master plan" that proposes the closure of 83 schools, affecting 18,644 students in the cities of Humacao, Ponce and San Juan. For Ponce and Humacao this is the second round of school closures.

Renewed protests have been triggered in recent weeks after it was revealed on February 2 that Pablo Mas Oquendo, a teacher, had died the previous day from a traffic accident on his way from a night gig as a security guard. Mas Oquendo fell asleep while driving home. He had two part-time jobs, in addition to teaching.

A mass march was held on February 4 in honor of Mas Oquendo, demanding the resignation of Puerto Rico's Governor Pedro Pierluisi.

In an attempt to stop further protests, Governor Pierluisi met with the teacher union bureaucracies and promised a \$1,000 temporary wage increase for teachers and a \$500 raise for firefighters, beginning in July 2022 until 2024. He also promised to revive a program of incentives for teachers who received

masters and doctorate degrees.

Undeterred, teachers declared a “Red Flu,” leaving their classrooms and taking to the streets, supported by their students. Other public workers, including firefighters, joined their strike action.

Provocatively, Pierluisi denounced the teachers’ job action, saying: “Those who don’t go to their jobs, unless they are really ill, are ignoring their duties. That is not right; it is unjustified. One can protest and march outside of work hours.”

Last Wednesday was the largest day of teachers’ protests, with over 80 percent of teachers going on strike. Thousands surrounded the Fortaleza in San Juan in a so-called “Great March of Indignation.” Many fire stations also closed.

Protests continued the next day, February 10. Pierluisi is now promising that the wage increases will be permanent and that pensions will improve, without indicating how these measures will be paid for without breaking with the Wall Street vulture funds and the Financial Oversight Board.

The aim of the protest organizers, the Broad Front in Defense of Public Education (FADEO), is to channel opposition behind fruitless appeals to pressure the Puerto Rican senate and federal courts to repudiate the agreement. FADEO is a coalition of several trade unions, including Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico (FMPR), Educadores por la Democracia, Unidad, Cambio, Militancia y Organización Sindical (Educamos) and Unión Nacional de Educadores y Trabajadores de la Educación (Unete).

FADEO does not include the Puerto Rican Teachers Association (AMPR), affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). The AMPR, for its part, participated in negotiations with the Financial Oversight Board and accepted the changes to the pension plans, arguing cynically that this betrayal was the only way to “save” pensions for teachers.

The Puerto Rican Teachers Federation announced that strikes and demonstrations will continue this week, beginning on Tuesday, to protest against plans in the legislature to make an expedited \$10 billion payment to the hedge fund holders of Puerto Rican debt, reversing its previous approval of the debt agreement. At a press conference announcing the protests, an FMPR spokesperson reminded legislators of the mass demonstrations in 2019, which involved up to a third of

the island’s population and forced the resignation of then-Governor Ricardo Rosello.

However, by directing teachers’ opposition into the dead-end of appeals to the Wall Street-dominated political establishment, while isolating them from the struggles of teachers in the United States and across the world, the teachers’ unions are leaving workers at the mercy of the very same big banks and their political representatives.

The genuine alternative to the AMPR, the FMPR and FADEO is for workers to take control of this struggle in their own hands, forming rank-and-file committees independent of the unions. Such committees have been organized by growing numbers of teachers in the United States and in other countries to fight against the homicidal reopening of schools to in-person learning while COVID-19 has surged.

Last year, the *World Socialist Web Site* initiated the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) in order to provide the framework for new, democratic and militant organizations of workers on an international scale. We urge all educators and workers seeking to fight for decent-paying jobs, a secure retirement, and an end to the pandemic to get involved in this initiative and contact us about forming a committee today.



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