

National day of strikes and protests in Puerto Rico

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Teachers and government workers carried out a national day of strikes and protests in Puerto Rico Friday. There were marches and rallies across the US territory. A mass demonstration took place in San Juan, Puerto Rico's capital city. The marchers demanded just wages and pensions and an end to the privatization of schools and government services. Despite a morning attempt by San Juan police to block a section of marchers, the protests were peaceful and high-spirited.

In San Juan, in the early morning hours demonstrators began congregating in the Hiram Bithorn baseball stadium before marching toward the headquarters of the Fiscal Control and Supervision Agency. Among the many demonstrators were teachers, electricity and road workers, university professors and students. The public electric authority was privatized in the wake of Hurricane Maria and is now administered by a global monopoly, LUMA.

The San Juan daily *Primera Hora* gave a glimpse of the conditions of daily life in Puerto Rico and presented the views of workers in the protest:

"Electricity and water bills are almost 60 percent higher in Puerto Rico than the US average. Foods are 18 percent higher than in the mainland, though the cost of medical attention and housing, among others, is lower", reported the newspaper. "Marcia Rivera, an economist and sociologist that investigates poverty and inequality, pointed out that government workers are facing price increases with the same wages that they received in 2008. 'The people are fed up,' she said."

In response to weeks of protests, Governor Pierluisi promised teachers a wage hike of \$1,000 per month, firefighters \$500 per month, and a 30 percent raise for paramedics. Pierluisi's promise is far less than the \$3,500 monthly wage that the teachers demand—currently the starting pay is \$1,750 per month.

However, except for some short-term federal funds, there is no indication where these raises are going to come

from, and whether the Financial Oversight Board would allow them. Pierluisi did not address the issue of retirement changes, imposed by the Oversight Board, which slash benefits and raise the retirement ages for all government workers.

Wanda Ramos, a special education teacher, reported that her expected monthly pension was reduced from \$2,400 upon retirement, to \$960, according to an AP report. She also said that it has been 12 years since her last raise in pay. "I can only buy essential items, I cannot fill my refrigerator," said Ramos, who also helps her daughter pay for her university education.

Wanda Cruz, a 52-year-old Spanish teacher, joined the demonstration to protest the new retirement rules. In her case she would have to work 11 more years, instead of four, to retire. Instead of a pension guarantee of 75 percent of her wages, she would receive 1.8 percent plus whatever she manages to save in her 401K plan. "I have worked 22 years in the Education Department and my pension is now frozen," Cruz told AP reporters. "This is a big blow because my retirement age has also been increased." She calculated that once she retires, she will receive \$500 monthly.

Thirty-eight-year-old Gilberto Rodríguez, a teacher and librarian with 16 years on the job, barely earns \$2,100 per month, and is considering resigning even though he could benefit from a law that if signed by the governor would give him \$30,000 owed to him for completing an advanced degree. "I began in 2006 and I would have to work another 25 years in order to retire. It's like starting from scratch", said Rodríguez.

David Garay, a former AEE electric worker who with 21 years seniority decided not to work for LUMA Energy when AEE was privatized (he now works for the Education Department), declared: "We are all angry at the government and, on top of everything, they now also want to change the Electric Energy Authority (AEE)

retirement.”

These experiences are similar to those of tens of thousands of Puerto Rican workers who have had their wages and working conditions effectively frozen under the impact of the 2008 financial crisis with its enormous unemployment and conditions that drove 45 percent of the island’s population into poverty, forcing thousands to emigrate.

The Puerto Rican rulers responded with waves of austerity and draconian budget cuts including school closures and the slashing of university budgets. As a result, necessary investments in infrastructure projects, including the electric authority, were left unattended, as government debts piled up.

Unable to resolve its financial and jobs crisis, the debt became unpayable and in June 2016 the US Congress created a Financial Oversight and Management Board, composed mostly of Wall Street executives appointed by the president as part of the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), to ensure debt repayment and the stabilization of Puerto Rican finances.

Under the rule of Financial Oversight Board, austerity policies continued. The devastation of the island by Hurricane Maria in October 2017, which caused economic losses estimated at \$90 billion and the near collapse of the electrical infrastructure, spurred the Financial Oversight Board into more privatizations and austerity measures.

As a consequence of the “managed” bankruptcy agreement with the administration of Governor Pedro Pierluisi, the Financial Oversight Board signed these new austerity measures and imposed them on Puerto Rican workers in order to pay Wall Street hedge funds and other holders of Puerto Rican debt instruments.

The continuing protests in Puerto Rico are manifestations of enormous anger over deteriorating living conditions and massive social inequality. The critical question is the building of a socialist movement of the working class in opposition to the policy of the unions which are seeking to dissipate anger into futile protests to the corrupt capitalist political parties.



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