Hurricane Fiona exposes social inequality in Puerto Rico

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On September 16, two days before Hurricane Fiona hit Puerto Rico, a video *El Apagón—Aquí vive gente* was posted in YouTube, featuring "Apagón" (Blackout), a song by Puerto Rican singer Bad Bunny about the blackout crisis on the island.

The video, with its powerful message denouncing the growing inequality on the island, exposes the power crisis, which followed the privatization of the public utility after Hurricane Maria and the bankruptcy restructuring of the island. At the time LUMA Energy promised reliable, better and less expensive service. All three assurances had long been exposed as lies when the video documentary was released.

"Apagón" depicts the popular anger that exists in Puerto Rico, long before the hurricane that hit two days after its release. Five days after its release "Apagón" had been shared 6.4 million times.

"God has been good to us and kept us safe this time when things could have been much worse," said Vice-Governor Anya Williams, downplaying the disastrous flooding and mudslides and the wholly inadequate response by federal and local authorities and LUMA management.

No disaster is purely a natural event; it also has political and social content. The frequency and severity of hurricanes is bound up with climate change and the refusal of capitalist governments to take any serious measures to address it. Moreover, the catastrophic impact that Hurricanes Katrina (New Orleans, 2005), Maria, Fiona and so many others is conditioned by the vast socioeconomic inequality that defines Puerto Rico, the United States and the rest of the world.

Both Governor Pedro Pierluisi and the electricity monopoly LUMA Energy had to walk back their promise that electricity would be restored within days. Predictably, the wealthy neighborhoods in San Juan and the beach condos were first in line.

This week, President Biden pledged "100 percent assistance" for Puerto Rico. What has in fact been offered is a pittance in "emergency aid." Deanne Criswell, who heads Biden's Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), told Governor Pedro Pierluisi that it was making available an insulting $700 in aid per household. Criswell went out of her way to emphasize that this was way over the $500 offered in 2017 after the landing of Hurricane Maria.

This is Biden's version of the infamous tossing of rolls of paper towels to people by President Trump five years ago. Despite all assurances in 2017, five years later less than one-third of the promised reconstruction has taken place and the island's electricity grid is in the hands of a profit-driven private firm.

President Biden also appoints the voting members of the Financial Control Board, which has placed the Puerto Rican economy on rations since the 2017 bankruptcy.

A week after the hurricane, 62 percent of households are still without power and face fuel shortages to power their generators, if they have them. Forty percent of households still lack running water. One thousand people are stuck in public shelters. Those most affected live in working class urban and rural municipalities.

As with Hurricanes Irma and Maria, the real human cost of this storm is being concealed. Five years ago, between 3,000 and 5,000 people died from Hurricane Maria, which did not flood the island like Fiona has done. Over 30 inches (76 centimeters) of water fell in parts of the island. The report of only four casualties has been met with skepticism.

As flood waters recede, the devastating impact of this storm is becoming clearer. A preliminary estimate from the Puerto Rican Agriculture Department is that wind and flood damage exceeds $100 million, including the loss of this year's banana and coffee crops and green vegetables. In addition, the storm virtually wiped out the bee industry.

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The Agriculture Department warned that when the full data is in, actual damages will surely exceed Friday's account.

The collapse of roads and bridges from the flooding left scores of households isolated in six municipalities. Short on resources, local authorities report having to rely on volunteers, religious groups, NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and individuals to deliver food and first aid while waiting for government and FEMA assistance to clear roads and repair bridges.

Mexico City's *El Proceso* news magazine interviewed Manuel Veguilla in a mountain region near Caguas, south of San Juan. "We are all incommunicado," declared Veguilla, adding that he was worried about the elderly residents of the municipality, including his brother, who lack the strength to walk to the nearest community. Veguilla doubted that city workers would be able to reach the area, describing large boulders that have been left by the receding flood waters. Meanwhile neighbors are sharing water and food left by a volunteer group. The community still lacks electricity and must rely on spring water.

On September 1, two weeks before the hurricane hit, a mass protest of workers and students took place in San Juan denouncing the LUMA Energy debacle and social inequality. In addition to demanding that LUMA's 15-year contract be rescinded, protesters carried signs calling for the restoration of social services, including the reopening of hundreds of schools that had been closed in the last decade.

This was the latest in a series of protests, marches and rallies against the devastating social conditions in the US territory. Eighteen days ahead of Hurricane Fiona's appearance, one demonstrator, José Rodriguez from Río Piedras, said he had come to the rally during the hurricane season because he was afraid that a total blackout would take place. "As an individual, I can survive," declared Rodriguez, "but I must think about the more than 30,000, which are bed-ridden. I must think about what happened after Hurricane Maria."

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