

# Puerto Rico: Self-organized relief projects of left activists as an alternative from below in the face of government's failures

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**Coming together to overcome FEMA failures. Monique Dols explains how self-organized relief projects of left activists in Puerto Rico show an alternative from below in the face of the federal government's failures.**



*A community-run kitchen serves food in Caguas (Daniel Orsini Velez | Centro de Ayuda Mutua)*

DONALD TRUMP'S hateful tweet that the residents of Puerto Rico "want everything to done for them" made people's blood boil around the world—but nowhere more than in Puerto Rico itself, where conditions are desperate after the devastation of two powerful hurricanes that was made worse by man-made factors.

In glaring contrast to Trump's racist twitter rant, the island's people are stepping up and organizing themselves, filling the vacuum left by the mismanagement of the federal government and some local authorities.

One example of self-organization to meet the needs of people still reeling from the disaster is the Centro de Apoyo Mutuo [\[1\]](#) (Mutual Aid Center) organized by members of Comedores Sociales de Puerto Rico (Community Kitchens of Puerto Rico) in Caguas, a city in a mountainous area south of San Juan.

Basing itself on the need for food and other critical supplies and services to reach the people who need them, CAM was formed a week after the hurricane and quickly became a hub of activity, with people pouring in to help each other through the crisis.

Organizers estimate the center feeds about 500 to 700 people per day and exists entirely on volunteer labor, donated food and food bought with monetary donations made directly to the project. At the center, people eat and cook together—and, just as importantly, find companionship and solidarity at a moment when millions are desperate and in despair, unsure of what will happen next.

Daniel Orsini, a CAM organizer in Caguas, says that solidarity activists outside of Puerto Rico wishing to send support to the island should donate directly to the CAM project. According to Orsini,

the federal government's FEMA operation is badly mismanaged, and supplies sent to Puerto Rico, including through mainstream NGOs, aren't getting to the people who need them.

**INDEED, THE center** of operations for the federal government at the over-air-conditioned Puerto Rico Convention Center in San Juan looks like an elaborate photo-opportunity [2].

Meanwhile, people across the island continue to struggle with issues related to daily survival—supermarkets have gone unstocked, clean water is difficult to come by, and a developing underground market is driving up prices of necessities such as water, food and diesel.

The demand to “release the relief” is growing louder as desperation grows. On October 10, Gov. Ricardo Roselló asked for a federal investigation into the growing complaints of mismanagement of relief from municipalities across the island.

Nurses from California who traveled to Puerto Rico on a relief mission organized by their union reported planning a march over the weekend to FEMA's headquarters to demand that the agency release bottled water for distribution.

“The water that we were drinking is now killing people [because] of a bacteria called leptospirosis,” one National Nurses United member wrote in a Facebook post. “We are out of water ourselves now. FEMA hasn't released one supply since they got here...FEMA needs to release the supplies to us so we can start distributing ourselves into the outskirts.”

Nurses reported later that city officials were able to get an agreement with FEMA to release seven truckloads of water to volunteer Teamster drivers, so the march was called off. “We get shit done,” another nurse wrote with pride.

But even so, not enough food and critical life-saving supplies are getting to communities that need them, and that's not to mention the repairs and reconstruction that will be necessary to prevent the outbreak of epidemics caused by lack of clean water and the destruction of sanitation systems.

This underlines the need for initiatives like Centro de Apoyo Mutuo.

**REPORTS FROM Comedores** Sociales organizers, along with a handful of mainstream media reports, highlight the self-organization and resilience of the Puerto Rican people on display at the center every day.

An Al Jazeera report shows dozens of people waiting in line for lunch, while in the distance, a singer and guitarist play a song of resistance, as others follow along, clap and smile. Children can be heard crying in the distance while their mother attends to their needs over the din of lunch being served and eaten [3].

Another mother of a young child sorts through piles of children's clothes arranged on a table, while a volunteer goes through the crowd, asking if anyone has unmet medical needs. Another organizer leads a chant of resistance: “Yo no como austeridad! Yo cocino dignidad!” (“I can't eat austerity! I cook dignity!”)

The network of community kitchens were founded by Roberto and others before the hurricane hit as years of intensifying austerity took their toll. CAM consciously links the current not-so-natural disaster of Hurricane Maria with the years-long debt crisis—while showing how the generosity and talents of ordinary people can be organized to meet the needs of people who have been neglected by FEMA or every other government agency.

As another CAM organizer, Giovanni Roberto, told Al Jazeera: “Before this crisis, the people that we are attending were already in a crisis. What we are seeing right now is that crisis coming out of the [background]...and being more public. People already were starving, people already were not getting medicine or proper medical attention.”

As Roberto explained in an interview, CAM fashions itself as a new kind of organization, one that can build new institutions to meet the needs of people in the context of a crumbling infrastructure and distribution system.

The example of CAM in feeding people despite limited resources has inspired others to launch similar initiatives. As of the writing of this article, the CAM model was being repeated in Humacao and other municipalities on the island.

According to Roberto, “The rich who have always wanted Puerto Rico are celebrating. They are starving people to force more migration, so they can reorganize the country for their interests. CAM is a concrete idea of how we can build institutions from below that are for and by the people. In Caguas, CAM is representing a glimpse of a new political power.”

## **Monique Dols**

### **WHAT YOU CAN DO**

Several grassroots organizations are taking donations to support ongoing efforts to bring immediate relief in Puerto Rico, reach the most vulnerable populations and foster an equitable rebuilding of the island. SW urges its readers to prioritize these grassroots efforts over mainstream NGOs.

— Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico

<https://www.gofundme.com/solidaridad-victimas-huracan-maria>

— Hurricane Maria Community Relief and Recovery Fund

<https://connect.clickandpledge.com/w/Form/cb4a3c78-5694-4324-bead-42c8ad94c1bf>

— Comedores Sociales de Puerto Rico (donate via Paypal to cdpecpr gmail.com).

— Feminist Solidarity Post-Hurricane Relief Fund organized by Colectiva Feminista

<https://www.youcaring.com/puertorico-963496>

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## **P.S.**

\* “Coming together to overcome FEMA failures”. October 10, 2017:

<https://socialistworker.org/2017/10/10/coming-together-to-overcome-fema-failures>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] <https://www.cdpecpr.org>

[2] <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/locales/nota/choquederealidadesenelcentrodeoperacione sdeemergencia-2363986/>

[3] [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xvLa\\_V7MEGg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xvLa_V7MEGg)