

After Hurricane María: Puerto Rico's Year of Recovery and Resistance

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One year after Hurricane María, Monique Dols looks back at the suffering endured by the people of Puerto Rico — and at their determination to fight for their island.

PUERTO RICO was pummeled by Hurricane María on September 20, 2017.

In the year since, that devastating injury has been followed by insult after insult to the island's people — from their initial abandonment in the weeks after the devastation of Hurricanes Irma and María, to the subsequent pillaging of public resources by disaster capitalists and their backers in the Puerto Rican and U.S. governments.

The latest insult came last month when Donald Trump continued to boast about his “fantastic job” in helping Puerto Ricans after the storms — and then discounted the reassessment of the storm's official death toll to nearly 3,000 victims as fake news “done by the Democrats in order to make me look as bad as possible. [1]”

However, the 150th anniversary of the Grito de Lares uprising against Spanish colonial rule [2] is also an important reminder that the people of Puerto Rico have a long and rich history of resistance, and that tradition has also been in evidence over the past year.

The U.S. government's handling of Puerto Rico's recovery from the hurricanes has shown the toxic results when disaster capitalism meets colonial inequality.

A colony of the U.S. since 1917, Puerto Rico in recent years has been shackled with a crippling, unpayable and illegal debt [3], which has been overseen by a dictatorial oversight board that imposed brutal spending cuts which made the country far more vulnerable to the ravages of the storms [4].

The now infamously defunct electrical and hospital systems, for example, were not simply wiped out by the winds. They were wiped out in the preceding years by a neoliberal storm that saw the closing of many clinics and the loss of 30 percent of the power authority's workforce [5].

These unjust colonial structures made it even easier for disaster capitalists to further destroy Puerto Rico's infrastructure when they swooped into the island after the storm looking to make a quick profit [6].

It is worth looking back at the events of the past year to understand that author and activist Naomi Klein wasn't exaggerating last June when she told *Democracy Now!* that the death toll in Puerto Rico wasn't just a tragedy, but “state-sponsored mass killing. [7]”

LONG BEFORE the government of Puerto Rico was forced by public outrage and pressure to admit that the death toll was many times more than the official original number, activists, advocates and

journalists had been sounding alarm bells — since as early as mid-October of last year.

They saw that the combination of a dangerously dilapidated hospital system, widespread lack of electricity, fuel and communication, sporadic garbage collection and a poorly coordinated food and water distribution system had Puerto Rico on the brink of what was — and in many ways still is — a widespread public health emergency.

They saw supplies stockpiled in the ports, while people who had lost everything were desperate for basic goods like water and food. They saw an outbreak of leptospirosis [8], a highly preventable disease spread through contact with floodwaters, while people without access to water were forced to bathe and drink out of untreated natural springs, streams and lakes.

At this point, just a few weeks after the storm, the death toll was estimated to be about 500, and it wasn't too late for the federal government to wield its vast resources to address Puerto Rico's historic crisis [9].

Instead, the Trump administration continued its policy of malign neglect [10], with devastating consequences, and the human toll was massive and devastating.

In the months to follow, victorious pronouncements of the local and federal governments continued to rub against daily realities on the island. People adjusted to a deteriorated new normal, including the constant sounds and smell of the portable generators that were now people's only reliable source of electricity [11].

The government completely bungled the rebuilding of the electrical system and the reopening of schools [12]. This was a product of both complete incompetence and an unwillingness to get the needed resources to the people who were capable of rebuilding — from active and retired electrical workers to teachers and community members.

The other factor was the government's lack of interest in maintaining public utilities and services, and its intention to instead use the storm as an excuse to privatize electricity, education and other public resources.

In late January, Puerto Rico's Gov. Ricardo Rosselló announced the privatization of the electrical system [13], as well as the privatization of the education system [14] through the opening of charter schools and the use of the voucher system.

Popular frustrations in the year since the storm are captured by the refrain of a plena song adapted by anti-austerity activists in Puerto Rico: *"Vagones por aquí, vagones por allá"* ("Trailers, here, there and everywhere"). Vagones are shipping containers that have become the symbol of government neglect in Puerto Rico.

Throughout the summer of 2018, a number of revelations showed that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had widely mismanaged the distribution of goods, as containers full of spoiled supplies and water were found in various locations around the island.

When the under-resourced Department of Forensic Sciences of Puerto Rico simply couldn't handle the quantity of dead bodies after Hurricane María, they were stored in refrigerated trailers (which didn't stay refrigerated all the time).

And when the island's Secretary of Education Julia Keleher closed more than 200 schools, she overcrowded the remaining schools, forcing "excess" children to now attend class in trailers, while their original schools sit empty.

BUT THE year since María is also a story of ordinary Puerto Ricans coming together to help one another and push back against their government's attacks.

As it quickly became clear in the aftermath of the storm that nobody was coming to save Puerto Rico, *auto-gestion*, or self-organization, quickly became the norm on the island. People banded together to help each other [15], their family members, neighbors and friends.

These initiatives helped many people to overcome the growing desperation and depression on the island and replace these feelings with solidarity and community. At a moment when suicides were on the rise and food was difficult to come by, community centers and schools were a lifeline of support.

In the absence of any kind of real relief effort on the part of the local or federal governments, these initiatives quickly took on a political character and spread all over the island, developing into a mutual aid network [16].

Reporters at the Center for Investigative Journalism [17] in Puerto Rico played a central role in collecting and telling the stories of the deceased, while government officials continued to put their head in the sand. In early June, the Center won a court order for the government to release María-related statistics to the media.

When a Harvard-based study estimated 4,645 "excess deaths" due to the hurricane, activists in San Juan called for people to memorialize their deceased loved ones by bringing their shoes to the marble plaza in front of the Capitol. The resulting memorial, known as Proyecto 4,645, helped to put names to the faces of the dead in Puerto Rico and beyond.

The frontal attack on the public school system has also spurred a resistance in the schools, led by the same educators, families and students who took it upon themselves to rehabilitate the schools that the widely reviled Keleher refused to reopen after the storm [18].

In what was the first large show of protest in Puerto Rico after the storm, some 16,000 educators walked out of schools on March 19 to protest the draconian anti-union legislation that promised to break up the public school system.

The following month, police used pepper gas against educators protesting the announcement of the Fiscal Oversight Board's plan to close 283 more schools in Puerto Rico.

This repression was followed by a coordinated attack against May Day protests in San Juan [19], in which dozens of protesters were brutalized, students were chased by police into private homes, and an immense campaign of intimidation and demonization of protesters took place.

Heading into a second year since the hurricane, it's become clear to more people on the island who is and isn't on their side. Solidarity activists in the U.S. need to make sure we don't let Trump's growing list of disasters take away our focus from continuing to support recovery and resistance in Puerto Rico.

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P.S.

• September 25, 2018:

<https://socialistworker.org/2018/09/25/puerto-ricos-year-of-recovery-and-resistance>

Footnotes

- [1] <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040220855400386560>
- [2] <http://www.elboricua.com/lares.html>
- [3] <http://socialistworker.org/2017/09/26/the-debt-before-the-storm>
- [4] <http://socialistworker.org/2018/01/16/the-crisis-before-the-crisis-in-puerto-rico>
- [5] <http://socialistworker.org/2017/10/18/puerto-ricos-disaster-was-years-in-the-making>
- [6] <http://socialistworker.org/2017/11/17/how-corporate-thieves-prey-on-puerto-rico>
- [7] https://www.democracynow.org/2018/6/6/naomi_klein_4_645_deaths_in
- [8] <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/10/24/health/leptospirosis-puerto-rico/index.html>
- [9] <http://socialistworker.org/2017/10/03/puerto-rico-is-facing-an-historic-crisis>
- [10] <http://socialistworker.org/2017/10/16/trumps-malign-neglect-of-puerto-rico>
- [11] <http://socialistworker.org/2017/11/30/survival-on-the-island-of-the-portable-generator>
- [12] <http://socialistworker.org/2017/12/20/corporate-profiteers-plunder-puerto-rico>
- [13] <http://socialistworker.org/2018/01/30/dont-privatize-puerto-ricos-electric-power>
- [14] <http://socialistworker.org/2018/02/21/charter-schools-and-the-future-of-puerto-rico>
- [15] <http://socialistworker.org/2017/10/10/coming-together-to-overcome-fema-failures>
- [16] <https://redapoyomutuo.org>
- [17] <http://periodismoinvestigativo.com/2018/09/the-deaths-of-hurricane-maria/>
- [18] <http://socialistworker.org/2018/01/04/puerto-rican-teachers-fight-to-reopen-schools>
- [19] ESSF (article 46385), [They can't crush the struggle in Puerto Rico - Teachers, students and others against austerity.](#)