

INTERVIEW

# **They can't crush the struggle in Puerto Rico - Teachers, students and others against austerity**

Friday 5 October 2018, by [LOPEZ Sixto](#) (Date first published: 17 May 2018).

**The struggle has become more urgent in Puerto Rico since the disaster caused by Hurricane María that still affects the island—and in response, Gov. Ricardo Rosselló's government and federal authorities are cracking down on the resistance of teachers, students and others against austerity imposed by the Fiscal Control Board set up under Barack Obama.**

On May 1, tens of thousands of people turned out for a protest [\[1\]](#), organized mainly around the issue of schools and led by the Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico (FMPR). Police brutally attacked the marchers, firing rubber bullets and using tear gas and pepper spray. At least 18 demonstrators were arrested, and hundreds suffered injuries from the police.

Sixto Lopez, a Puerto Rican solidarity activist living in Chicago, answered Socialist Worker's questions about what happened on May 1 and what it means for the struggle.

## **WHAT ARE the conditions in Puerto Rico that led to the major outpouring of protest on May 1?**

SIXTO LOPEZ - NEARLY EIGHT months after Hurricane María hit Puerto Rico, a huge sector of business is still closed, unemployment is increasing, and working class towns and neighborhoods in the middle of the island still lack electricity.

Knowing the capacity and resources that the U.S. military has to move tons of weapons, resources and soldiers from any part of the U.S. to the mountains of Syria or Afghanistan, people are questioning why the U.S. Army, which managed the process of reconstruction from María, couldn't reach areas in the middle of the island.

One might also add that the police are nowhere to be found when they are needed. The police only show their true mission when ordinary people show up in numbers and threaten the economic and political dominance of investors, banks and politicians.

The police show by the hundreds to crush a strike or rally at the Universidad de Puerto Rico, but not when a student is raped. The National Guard was activated to crush the truck driver's strike in 2005, but not to help restore electric power and services in the middle of the island after a Category 5 hurricane.

People are connecting the dots, and patience is running out. Radical slogans from Colectiva Feminista, teachers from the Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico (FMPR) and the student

movement are finding echoes among the large numbers who participated on May 1.

### **WHAT HAPPENED at the demonstration? Can you tell us what people reported to you about the police attack?**

TWO DAYS before May 1, the leaders of unions and social movements sat down with Héctor Pesquera, the Commissioner of Safety and Public Protection, to lay out some safety issues and coordinate the routes that the different organizations were going to take. The march would be peaceful, and the police agreed to all the routes presented—or at least that's what Commissioner Pesquera promised.

The actions on May 1 in Puerto Rico were peaceful and massive. Hundreds of kids marched miles under the sun and rain with their parents and teachers, demanding that their schools stay open, retired workers marched with their families to defend their pensions.

It was a multiracial, multi-generation and peaceful demonstration—until the orders came down from on high.

The march that started from the University of Puerto Rico in Río Piedras was supposed to meet with the rest of the protesters in La Milla de Oro, an area where many big corporations and banks have offices. But the feeder march was blocked by more than a hundred militarized police and members of SWAT teams.

The police cut off the march and prevented groups from joining forces at La Milla de Oro. Colectiva Feminista, for example, was blocked and forced to change its route.

So what was planned changed drastically. The police clearly intended to stop the march, and under no circumstances let it reach the building where la Junta de Control Fiscal meets. There were groups of police stationed at every angle to cage the protesters. On top of the roofs, snipers were already positioned.

It was orchestrated like this from the beginning. Orders came from government and La Junta to stop the march from reaching their building by any means necessary.

For more than an hour, tensions built. The police continued to block the march and called for reinforcements, putting their gas masks on. Protesters remained, chanting slogans and demanding that the police move away. Students armed with wooden shields formed a line in front to protect the rest of the crowd. Neither side backed down.

Then the call came for the police to disperse the area. Police started to crack heads and bodies with their batons, and use stun grenades and sound bombs. A cloud of tear gas covered the streets of Hato Rey. Protesters ran away from the brutality and violence, while others tried to help people who were beaten down.

The police hunted activists that they had identified from past struggles. For from miles, from the streets of Hato Rey to the streets of Santa Rita in Río Piedras, police chased activists and terrorized the neighborhoods.

Students went back to their houses and apartments, looking for protection and a place to hide from the police. But that didn't stop them. Police entered the apartments of students, dragged them out of their houses, beat them and arrested them.

At the end of the day, hundreds were injured and 18 compañeras y compañeros were arrested. The

cloud of tear gas covered and choked Hato Rey for the whole evening.

That night as family members, lawyers and activists were trying to find their loved ones, police did everything they could to control information. One compañera, Angélica, was bleeding from the head, but the police didn't allow medical attention, and no information was released.

Only the determination of family members and lawyers acting in solidarity forced the police to release information about the people they took into custody.

### **HOW DOES what happened on May 1 fit into the larger picture of protest and repression since Hurricane María?**

THIS IS a new chapter in the repression of the working class and social movements in Puerto Rico.

It's clear that the Government is criminalizing protesters in any way they can. A witch hunt is being carried out by the police. Lt. Iván Bahr, the head of a special drug enforcement section of the state police, and his gang of taxpayer-paid thugs is profiling and terrorizing student activists through social media. Repression is in full-scale mode.

A couple days ago, the radical theater collective Papel Machete was terrorized by the police. Helicopters flew for hours over its property, and police circled the area taking pictures. Scott Barbés, a co-coordinator of Jornada Se Acabaron Las Promesas, was interviewed by three FBI officers who stole his cell phone.

Alvin Couto, a longtime activist in Puerto Rico, has been followed and accused of some kind of crime just for insulting Commissioner Héctor Pesquera on social media. Parents, teachers and students fighting against the closure of their schools are being terrorized by armed police.

This is the latest example of increasing state repression and violence. Student activists who stood up the rights of public education are still dealing with legal battles after more than a year.

And following May Day actions in 2017, the compañera Nina Droz was arrested for protesting in the streets. She was then kidnapped by federal authorities and put on trial for supposedly trying to burn down a concrete building with a lit match. She has been in prison ever since.

We need to organize solidarity for the struggle in Puerto Rico here in the U.S. We stand with all of these activists and raise our voice with theirs so that their message of struggle can be heard by many more.

As teachers in West Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Arizona and other places stand up, as youth take to the streets to demand an end to violence and a better world, as hundreds of thousands participate in the Women's Marches, as so many people take to the streets and embrace a culture of struggle and activism against Donald Trump and his politics, socialists need to be a part of every struggle we can.

We can help build bridges of solidarity between social movements and organize a political alternative that appeals to the masses in struggle.

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## **P.S.**

- May 17, 2018:

<http://socialistworker.org/2018/05/17/they-cant-crush-the-struggle-in-puerto-rico>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] <http://socialistworker.org/2018/05/03/teachers-brutalized-in-puerto-rico>