



October 8, 2017

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Puerto Rico: Profits Over People

Conditions in Puerto Rico continue to deteriorate after the island was leveled when Hurricane Maria hit on September 20. The vast majority of its electric and telecommunications infrastructure has been destroyed while half of the island is still without drinking water. Many hospitals have been without electricity or are relying on old diesel generators to provide electricity. Families are forced to wait in lines for five to six hours each day to receive rations of food and fuel from the inadequate aid centers that do exist.

While major American news agencies repeat government reports about the island's casualties, journalists and activists based in Puerto Rico are reporting that death tolls are much higher. Amidst this chaos, Trump's response has been predictable – bragging about the “fantastic job” he is doing while accusing the Mayor of San Juan, the island's capital, of poor leadership. He even tweeted that the Puerto Rican people weren't doing enough to help themselves and wanted the government to do everything for them!

In reality, the government's response to this humanitarian crisis has been criminally negligent. After the hurricane struck, relief to the island from the mainland was delayed for a week due to the government's refusal to waive the Jones Act, a 1920s-era law designed to protect the U.S. shipping industry by prohibiting foreign vessels from carrying cargo between U.S. ports. Only after public outcry did the Trump administration institute a ten-day waiver on the law to loosen these restrictions.

Once aid arrives on the island, there is no guarantee it will even get where it needs to go. Despite military deployment to support the relief effort, it has been reported that 10,000 shipping containers filled with supplies remain sitting at the port of San Juan, with a lack of truck drivers and blocked roads cited as reasons for the inaction.

This is insane that the wealthiest country and biggest military in the world cannot figure out better logistics. How has this happened? The answer is that Trump and his inner-circle of bankers and executives are allowing it to.

This response to Maria is the newest chapter of the U.S. colonial relationship with Puerto Rico. After coming under US control in 1898, the island was mainly utilized for sugar production and military purposes until after World War II, when its economic focus shifted toward making it into a tax haven for large industries such as manufacturing and pharmaceuticals. However, in the mid-90s, these policies were rescinded and most of the island's industry moved abroad for greater profits, leaving behind massive unemployment and economic decline.

For the past two decades, U.S. financial institutions have responded to this flight of investment by collaborating with the Democrats and Republicans in Washington to keep the Puerto Rican economy afloat through a variety of predatory loans. This has created a massive debt crisis on the island and has made Puerto Rico into the most indebted territory within the United States.

In the wake of the hurricane, Wall Street vultures are now circling for blood, seeking to use the island's destruction and financial situation as the pathway to completely privatize its electrical grid. We've seen this “disaster capitalism” before in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. The 1% used the disaster to rapidly privatize public services, including replacing all of the city's public schools with for-profit charter schools.

The negligence shown towards Puerto Rico is yet another symptom of this decaying system, where a tiny elite of financial parasites earn lavish paydays off the misery of hard-working people. Instead of using resources to prepare for emergencies or to help vulnerable populations in a time of need, the logic of this system encourages indifference and destruction. The time has come for capitalism to be replaced with a system based on human need instead of profit.

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