

THE MILITANT

**EYEWITNESS REPORT
FROM PUERTO RICO**

A SOCIALIST NEWSWEEKLY PUBLISHED IN THE INTERESTS OF WORKING PEOPLE

VOL. 82/NO. 24 JUNE 18, 2018

2,000+ died from colonial disregard in Puerto Rico

BY SETH GALINSKY

Harvard University researchers reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine* May 31 that the death toll in Puerto Rico in the first two months after Hurricane Maria was in the thousands, not the 64 government officials have insisted for months. Then Puerto Rico's Health Department released new statistics showing nearly 2,000 died.

The death toll is an indictment of more than 100 years of U.S. colonial rule and the plunder of the island's resources, human and natural, to enrich U.S. and Puerto Rican capitalists. And the refusal to acknowledge the true scope of the social catastrophe visited on working people shows the rulers' callous disregard.

Under Spanish rule, the colonial masters raised coffee and sugar, importing slaves from Africa to do the heavy lifting. Still, most of the food consumed in Puerto Rico was grown there.

Continued on page 3

Truckers bring Brazil to a halt, force gov't to cut tolls, prices

BY EMMA JOHNSON

After a 10-day strike brought much of Brazil to a standstill, independent truck drivers forced the government to cut fuel prices, lower freight tolls and promise more government contracts.

The work stoppage started May 21 with more than 200,000 of Brazil's 1 million independent drivers joining in. The impact was immediate and grew with each passing day, affecting more and more of Latin America's biggest economy. Brazil is one of the world's largest so-called emerging markets — part of BRIC, along with Russia, India and China.

Brazilian President Michel Temer and Pedro Parente, then chief executive of Petrobras, the country's state-run oil monopoly, are both known for their advocacy of free-market capitalist rule. They had removed previous government controls on diesel fuel prices, allowing the cost to truck drivers to go up to match world market

Continued on page 2

Workers in Puerto Rico respond to social disaster

Hurricane catastrophe is result of capitalist rule



May 7 protest in Humacao, Puerto Rico, demanding government finally take action to restore electricity 8 months after Hurricane Maria. Protests have had an impact, "but most of Yabucoa is still without electrical service," Lenis Rodríguez told the *Militant* there. "We're still fighting."

BY JOHN STUDER
AND MARTÍN KOPPEL

YABUCOA, Puerto Rico — "We were hit by two hurricanes. One was Maria. The other was the social hurricane. It's much worse than the natural one, and it's still with us."

This is what person after person told us during a fact-finding reporting and solidarity trip to Puerto Rico in late May by the *Militant* editor and a reporter for the paper, both members of the Socialist Workers Party. We visited towns and rural communities in the southeast as well as the capital, San Juan. What they

described is the result of capitalist rule in a nation under the U.S. colonial boot.

More importantly, workers told us the ways they have begun to organize to confront the social catastrophe that unfolded after the storm devastated the island last September. Protests have been organized by people who had never been involved in such activity — demanding the government restore electric service and provide aid, and opposing the closure of public schools.

The big-business media has portrayed working people here as helpless victims.

Continued on page 4

New York protest demands truth about deaths, debt in Puerto Rico



Militant/Mike Shur

It was working people, not the government who cleared roads, fixed schools after hurricane, Rafael Feliciano, Federation of Puerto Rican Teachers, told June 2 protest in front of U.N.

BY SETH GALINSKY

NEW YORK — Nearly 200 people protested outside the United Nations here June 2 to demand a truthful accounting of the death toll in the wake of Hurricane Maria's devastation in Puerto Rico, deaths caused by the indifference of the governments in Washington and San Juan. They also demanded an audit of the colonial government's \$74 billion debt to holders of the island's bonds.

Hanging behind the speakers platform was a large blue tarp that read "4645 #audit PR deaths," a reference to a recently released Harvard Uni-

versity study that said that the official death toll of 64 was nowhere near the real figure. The tarp symbolizes the tens of thousands of homes without roofs, that are still protected only by blue tarps that were distributed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The U.S. agency has rejected more than 300,000 requests for aid to rebuild damaged homes.

The protest was initiated by Union Theological Seminary; Fort Washington Collegiate Church; Middle Collegiate Church; Intersections, a project of

Continued on page 3

Workers confront consequences of rulers' wars in the Middle East

BY TERRY EVANS

Working people in the Middle East continue to suffer the deadly consequences of the combat and jockeying among Washington, Moscow, Tehran, Riyadh, Ankara and the other capitalist rulers in the region, all seeking to protect their economic and political interests. The Pentagon publicly admitted June 1 its forces were responsible for at least 500 civilian deaths in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Yemen in 2017. And they admit the number could be at least twice as high.

The civil war in Syria began when the dictatorial regime of Bashar al-Assad ruthlessly crushed popular mobilizations for political rights in 2011. Since then, millions have been driven from their homes and hundreds of thousands killed by Assad's forces, their backers in Moscow and Tehran, and other combatants there.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights reports the Syrian regime has

been responsible for over 190,000 civilian deaths, along with some 4,000 from Russian bombing, 3,800 by Syrian opposition forces, 3,700 by Islamic State and other Islamist groups, 950 by the U.S. and European allies and 500 by Kurdish fighters. No figures are given for Ankara's forces, which bombarded then invaded the Kurdish province of Afrin earlier this year.

Continued on page 2

Inside

Fidel Castro: Cuba backs fight for Puerto Rican independence 4

Cuba mobilizes to care for all as tropical storm Alberto hits 5

—On the picket line, p. 3—

Locked-out Quebec aluminium workers win support

Rulers’ Middle East wars

Continued from front page

A million and a half Syrians have fled to Syria’s northwest from the assaults of Assad and his backers. Their lives are grim. Tens of thousands face economic desperation, without jobs, schools or resources. Some 30,000 live in tent camps near Aleppo. Most have no electricity. Unemployment is over 50 percent in the country as a whole.

One of the sharpest conflicts unfolding in Syria pits the Israeli government against the capitalist rulers in Iran, who call for the destruction of Israel and driving Jews into the sea.

Following airstrikes on Tehran’s military forces in Syria in May, Israel’s capitalist rulers now seek to further weaken Tehran’s presence there. Iran’s rulers have expanded their military reach as their militias battled Assad’s opponents.

The Israeli and Russian governments have struck a deal to press for the removal of Tehran’s forces from within 70-80 kilometers (43-50 miles) of the Israeli border, the *Times of Israel* reported June 1. And they agreed that Tel Aviv could continue bombarding Tehran-backed forces elsewhere in Syria, as long as Tel Aviv avoids hitting the Syrian regime’s facilities.

In keeping with this arrangement, a Syrian Air Force commander said May 28 that Tehran-backed militias would be prevented from using the regime’s aircraft hangers to store ammunition.

For years Russian President Vladimir Putin hasn’t objected to the Israeli government targeting of Tehran’s missile depots. At the same time, Tel Aviv says it has not targeted Tehran-organized ground forces that are allied with Moscow in crushing Syrian opposition groups and bolstering Assad.

The Syrian government is moving to

crush remaining opponents holding territory in southwestern Syria, closer to the Israeli border. The Syrian Human Rights Monitoring Organization reported June 2 that Assad intends to disarm Tehran-backed militias still in Syria.

The Iranian rulers don’t want to relinquish their rising influence. They have fought for decades to extend the counterrevolution throughout the region that they carried out against working people at home since the early 1980s. Their gains in the Syrian civil war have been paid for in blood by Iranian youth and others who serve as cannon fodder. The mounting toll of their military intervention abroad falls overwhelmingly on the working class in Iran, and was the catalyst for protests that swept across 90 cities and towns in Iran in late December and early January.

At home they’ve acted to preserve capitalist rule by pushing back gains made by working people, women and oppressed nationalities during the 1979 Iranian Revolution that ousted the hated tyranny of the U.S.-backed shah.

Hamas, the reactionary Islamist group that governs the Gaza Strip, and Islamic Jihad launched over 100 rocket attacks on Israel over 24 hours May 29. Israeli military officials say their missile defense system intercepted any that could have hit civilians.

Like the assaults Hamas organized



AP Photo/Felipe Dana

Airstrike of Mosul, Iraq, July 11, 2017, during U.S.-led coalition offensive. Pentagon admitted its forces caused at least 500 civilian deaths in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Yemen that year.

at the Israeli border fence weeks before, the rocket attacks were designed to draw heavy Israeli retaliation, sacrifice Palestinian lives and try to win Hamas public sympathy from Western governments. The Israeli rulers retaliated with 60 airstrikes on Gaza, targeting weapons storage sites and tunnels into Israel.

This continuous cycle of Hamas provocations and the Israeli rulers’ retaliation is a dead end. In a December statement that can be downloaded from the *Militant’s* website, the Socialist Workers Party points to an alternative course: “The political necessity for the Israeli

and Arab governments and leadership of Palestinian organization to begin immediate talks to recognize both Israel and an independent Palestinian state.

“Negotiations to reach such an agreement must recognize the right of Jews everywhere to take refuge in Israel in face of the global rise of Jew-hatred and anti-Semitic violence, as well as the unconditional right of the dispossessed Palestinian people to a contiguous, sovereign homeland on territory — including East Jerusalem — conquered and occupied by the Israeli government during the 1967 war.”

Truckers in Brazil force gov’t to cut tolls, prices

Continued from front page

prices. This led to the mass walkout.

Truckers put up hundreds of roadblocks, sealing off highways across the country. After the first few days gas stations ran out of fuel. Production and

trade ground to a halt. Big cities like Sao Paulo became close to free of traffic. Airports only allowed planes to land that had fuel to fly out. Auto production nationwide shut down for a week.

But the truckers’ demands and their strike were widely supported. A May 29 Datafolha poll — eight days into the walkout — showed 87 percent backing.

Three days into the strike President Temer announced he had struck a deal with strike leaders, but the truckers didn’t move their trucks. A couple days later he issued an order authorizing the military to clear the roads. None of it worked. Finally, in a May 27 televised address, he announced the government had granted all the truckers’ demands and after a few

days trucks began moving again.

“If they don’t keep their promises, we’ll be back,” Edelberto Gomes, one of the rank-and-file strike leaders, told the *Financial Times*.

The strike further weakened the already shaky and discredited government. Petrobras’ Parente resigned June 1. The state-owned oil company controls 90 percent of the oil and gas sector in the country.

‘Militant’ publishing break

This is a three-week issue. The next issue will be mailed June 28.

THE MILITANT

Defend women’s right to choose abortion!

A large majority voted May 25 to repeal Ireland’s constitutional ban on abortion. The vote reflects deep-going changes in men’s and women’s outlook in the fight to defend women’s rights, coming out of social changes, including the integration of women into the workforce.

Reuters/Clodagh Kilcoyne

Celebration in Dublin May 26 after victory in Ireland vote to repeal abortion ban.

SUBSCRIBE TODAY!

NEW READERS

☐ \$5 for 12 issues

RENEWAL

☐ \$10 for 12 weeks

☐ \$20 for 6 months

☐ \$35 for 1 year

NAME

ADDRESS

CITY

STATE

ZIP

PHONE

E-MAIL

UNION/SCHOOL/ORGANIZATION

CLIP AND MAIL TO THE MILITANT,
306 W. 37TH ST., 13TH FLOOR NEW YORK, NY 10018.

12 weeks of the *Militant* outside the U.S.: Australia, A\$10 • United Kingdom, £3 • Canada, Can\$7 • Caribbean and Latin America, US\$10 • Continental Europe, £10 • France, 8 euros • New Zealand and the Pacific Islands, NZ\$7 • All other areas, US\$16 (Send payment to addresses listed in business information box)

The Militant

Vol. 82/No. 24

Closing news date: June 4, 2018

Editor: John Studer

Editorial volunteers: Róger Calero, Terry Evans, Seth Galinsky, Emma Johnson, Martin Koppel, Jacob Perasso, Brian Williams.

Published weekly except for one week in January, one week in June, one week in July, one week in September, one week in December.

The Militant (ISSN 0026-3885), 306 W. 37th Street, 13th floor, New York, NY 10018.
Telephone: (212) 244-4899
Fax: (212) 244-4947
E-mail: themilitant@mac.com
Website: www.themilitant.com

Correspondence concerning subscriptions or changes of address should be addressed to the Militant, 306 W. 37th Street, 13th floor, New York, NY 10018.

Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to the Militant, 306 W. 37th Street, 13th floor, New York, NY 10018.

SUBSCRIPTIONS: United States: For one year send \$35 to above address.

Latin America, Caribbean: For one year send

\$85 drawn on a U.S. bank to above address.

Africa, Asia, and the Middle East: For one year send \$85 drawn on a U.S. bank to above address.

Canada: For one year send Canadian \$45 to the Militant, 7107 St. Denis #204, Montreal, Quebec H2S 2S5.

United Kingdom: Send £26 for one year by check or international money order made out to CL London, 2nd Floor, 83 Kingsland High St., Dalston, London, E8 2PB, England.

Republic of Ireland and Continental Europe: Send £85 for one year by check or international money order made out to CL London at above address.

France: Send 100 euros for one year to Diffusion du Militant, BP 10130, 75723 Paris Cedex 15.

New Zealand and the Pacific Islands: Send NZ\$55 for one year to P.O. Box 13857, Auckland 1643, New Zealand.

Australia: Send A\$70 for one year to Suite 22, 10 Bridge St., Granville NSW 2142, Australia.

Submissions to the *Militant* may be published in the newspaper in print and digital format. By submitting, authors represent that their submissions are original and consent to publication in this manner.

Signed articles by contributors do not necessarily represent the *Militant’s* views. These are expressed in editorials.

—ON THE PICKET LINE—

Locked-out Quebec aluminum workers win support

BÉCANCOUR, Quebec — The over 1,000 members of United Steelworkers Local 9700, who've been locked out by the ABI Bécancour aluminum bosses since Jan. 11, received a solidarity boost when professors from the University of Quebec at Trois-Rivières joined their picket line May 29. They brought a \$5,000 check for the union.

We are here “to condemn the lockout which aims to force workers to accept decisions which are not theirs,” Ismail Biskri, president of the professors’ union, told workers on the line. “We lived through our own 14-day lockout, and we can’t forget the ABI lockout.” Professors were locked out May 2-16.

The Alcoa and Rio Tinto bosses, who own ABI, locked out the aluminum workers after they voted against a concessions contract. Bosses demanded a divisive two-tier pension plan where new hires would have inferior benefits.

The bosses have refused to bargain. The Liberal Party government appointed former Quebec Premier Lucien Bouchard as a special mediator in April, but he hasn’t succeeded in restarting negotiations. And Washington’s May 31 announcement of punitive tariffs on aluminum imports from Canada has added pressure on the bosses to attack the workers. Some 80 percent of Canada’s aluminum is exported to the U.S.

The workers’ strike trailer has a “solidarity wall” filled with dozens of logos of unions that have given donations or are sending thousands of dollars weekly.

Lisane Corriveau, an electrolysis operator, told Communist League members who joined the picket line May 27 how a busload of ABI workers distributed leaflets to 500 nonunion workers at the Alcoa plant in the town

of Deschambault asking for support and inviting them to join the union. “We were well received,” she said.

Night shift pickets were warmly appreciative when in early May a Walmart worker delivered a solidarity card signed by seven Walmart workers from two stores in the Montreal area.

“It is very good when people like you come by the picket line,” 25-year ABI veteran Alain Auger said. “If there is one place that needs a union, it’s Walmart.”

Send solidarity messages and donations to Métallos SL 9700 F.D.P. Attention Éric Moore, section locale 9700, 8310, rue Desormeaux, Bécancour, Quebec G9H 2X2. Credit card donations can also be made online by visiting: www.metallos.org/lockout-abi/.

— Michel Prairie and Bob Carter



Militant/Bob Carter

United Steelworkers members locked out by ABI Bécancour bosses in Quebec picket plant May 27, in front of solidarity wall. Walmart worker Michel Prairie holds poster of support.

2,000+ died from colonial disregard in Puerto Rico

Continued from front page

Washington’s imperialist plunder began in 1898 when U.S. troops wrested control of Puerto Rico — and Cuba — from the Spanish crown, and began twisting the island’s economy to meet their colonial needs.

U.S. capitalists bought up the land, expanded sugar cane and built huge refineries for the home market. By the 1930s sugar production increased 1,200 percent, but less and less food for local consumption was grown. During World War II, U.S. bosses saw Puerto Rico as a source of cheap labor and a market for U.S. goods. In 1947 the U.S. and local government launched Operation Bootstrap, granting across-the-board tax exemptions to U.S. companies to set up there. The first pharmaceutical company, in what became a \$60 billion-a-year industry, opened in 1957.

The industrialization accelerated the decline of agriculture. Peasant jíbaros were pushed out of the countryside to work in factories in Puerto Rico and the United States. Today at least 85 percent of the food consumed there is imported. It also marked the beginning of a massive migration to the U.S., more than half a million from 1947 to 1960 alone.

With the rise of the colonial revolution around the world in the 1950s, and then the Cuban Revolution in 1959, Washington’s propaganda machine marketed Puerto Rico as a “showcase of democracy,” the alternative to revolutionary Cuba. It claimed Puerto Rico was a “commonwealth,” not a colony.

But working people have continuously resisted both the Spanish and the U.S. colonizers. The first big rebellion — Grito de Lares in 1868 — intertwined the fight for self-rule with the abolition of slavery. In 1934 tens of thousands of sugar workers went on strike for better wages and conditions and asked Pedro Albizu Campos, the leader of the Nationalist Party, the main pro-independence group, to be their spokesperson.

Worried about the growing support for independence, the colonial regime passed the infamous “Gag Law” in 1947, prohibiting the display of the Puerto Rican flag, the singing of patriotic songs and any discussion of independence. It wasn’t repealed until a decade later.

In October 1950, the Nationalist Party launched the Jayuya uprising. With the help of the National Guard the rebellion was brutally put down.

Successive waves of courageous

working-class and independence fighters have been jailed by the U.S. overlords — from Albizu Campos to Rafael Cancel Miranda and Lolita Lebrón to Oscar López, who finally won his freedom in 2017.

U.S. corporations expanded their highly profitable operations in Puerto Rico, fueled by tax breaks from Washington. But as the crisis of capitalism has unfolded, the U.S. rulers phased out most of them. Then the 2006 worldwide capitalist financial crash accelerated the decline. The Puerto Rican government debt to wealthy bondholders mushroomed from \$43 billion in 2006 to \$74 billion today.

To pay the debt, the colonial government has laid off thousands of public workers, closed schools, raised sales taxes, cut pensions, and cut so far back on maintenance and modernization of the electric system that it was on the verge of collapse even before the hurricane hit. The attacks have deepened after President Barack Obama and the U.S. Con-

gress imposed the unelected Financial Oversight and Management Board to run the island in 2016.

Working people in the U.S. and Puerto Rico “have common interests and struggles — to get the U.S. government and the capitalist ruling class it represents off their back,” Osborne Hart, then Socialist Workers Party candidate for mayor of New York, told the U.N. Special Committee on Decolonization in 2017. “It’s their system that’s responsible for the unprecedented world capitalist crisis we are living through. This disaster comes crashing down harder today on Puerto Rico’s working people and others because of its colonial bondage to Washington.

“Cuba’s socialist revolution shows us what workers and farmers can accomplish when we organize ourselves to take state power out of the hands of the capitalist class, transforming ourselves in the process,” Hart said. “Along that road genuine independence can be won.”

Protest demands truth on deaths, debt

Continued from front page

the Collegiate churches; and Uprose, a long-time Latino organization in Brooklyn.

Rafael Feliciano, organization secretary of the Federation of Puerto Rican Teachers, told the crowd about his experiences after the storm in Cayey, Puerto Rico, where he lives.

“The clearing of the roads was not done by the government,” he said. “It was the people who opened the road with machetes and chainsaws, not the government. The deaths aren’t from the hurricane. The deaths are the product of colonialism and capitalism.”

Feliciano said that teachers organized with parents and others in their local communities to clean up and restore the schools, even though “the Department of Education threatened them,” claiming they would get more funding if the schools were left damaged.

“We protested, we forced them to reopen more than 90 percent of the schools,” he said.

Working people face the same challenges in the U.S. and around the world, Feliciano said. “The working class is one, no matter where it is.”

The same day, hundreds of Puerto Ricans took part in creating a powerful memorial to those who died as a

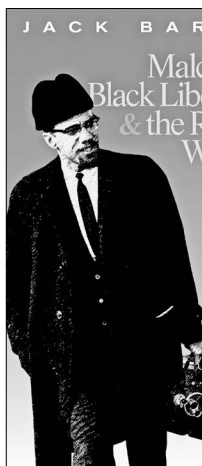
result of the hurricane, placing their shoes outside the U.S. colony’s Capitol. Over hours, more than 1,600 pairs of shoes were placed in the square, many accompanied by notes, flowers and Puerto Rican flags.

Word of the memorial spread over social media, and people came from all over the island. “The deaths are the responsibility of a government that does not respond and of another government that supposedly is supportive but what it is really doing is destroying,” professor Luisa Márquez told *Primera Hora*, referring to the governments of both Puerto Rico and the U.S.

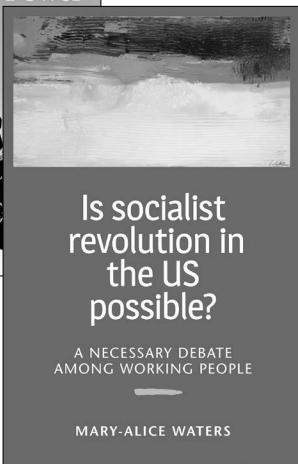
Cristina Vázquez’s father died in the wake of the storm. “We don’t know the details because we came to his house and found him dead,” she said. The coroner told them “that he had to put down it was because of ‘natural causes.’”

Others who spoke at the New York action included Elizabeth Yeampierre, executive director of Uprose; Judith Sheridan-González, president of the New York State Nurses Association; Alejandro Molina, a key organizer of the fight to free Puerto Rican independence fighter Oscar López, who won release last May after more than 35 years in U.S. prisons; and several members of New York’s Puerto Rican community.

More reading



Special offer: \$15 for book at left, \$10 with subscription.



Special offer: \$7 for book at right, \$5 with subscription.

See list of distributors on page 6 or visit: www.pathfinderpress.com

New Militant website is live

The *Militant*’s upgraded website is up and running! It offers easier access to coverage of working-class politics — from today back to 1928. Readers can also purchase subscriptions online. www.themilitant.com

Puerto Rico: Eyewitness report

Continued from front page

“Yabucoa Lives Amid Resignation and Darkness,” was the front-page headline in the May 28 *El Nuevo Día*, a major daily.

But the picture we saw was quite different. In face of the collapse of services essential to daily life and the callous indifference to what working people faced from capitalist authorities — from Washington to San Juan — what comes through is resilience and increased confidence, as thousands join together in working-class and rural neighborhoods across the island to fight, rebuild and take care of each other.

And there’s a thirst to know why this happened to them and how they can make sure it never happens again.

“I like the word solidarity, because that’s what we’re doing here,” said Lenis Rodríguez as he took us around his hometown of Yabucoa, on Puerto Rico’s southeast coast. Rodríguez works afternoon shifts at a nearby pharmaceutical plant and spends much of his free time organizing together with other residents to help meet basic needs, both in the city and surrounding rural areas.

In March, after six months without electricity, he and others in the Jardines de Yabucoa neighborhood organized a “march of the flashlights” to protest the government’s inaction. It was covered live by reporter Yeidy Vega, who herself lives in an area of Humacao that still lacks service. She told us, “I try to cover all the demonstrations I can get to.”

“The next day I got a call from engineers at the electric company,” Rodríguez said with a smile. “That’s how our neighborhood got power back. But most of Yabucoa is still without electrical service, and we’re still fighting.”

Today, tens of thousands of people remain without power, especially in Humacao and Yabucoa, where the hurricane made landfall, and in Utuado and other towns in the mountainous interior.

‘A disaster waiting to happen’

“It was just a matter of time before a disaster like this was going to happen,” said Raúl Laboy, a retired electrical worker in the Mariana neighborhood,

located in the hills overlooking Humacao. “We’re a U.S. colony, and the priority of the colonial rulers is to enrich U.S. corporations at our expense. We are not the owners of our own country.”

Since Washington invaded and seized Puerto Rico in 1898, U.S. capitalists have warped its economy to serve their profit interests. They have turned the island into an export platform based on superexploited labor, maintaining a large reserve of unemployed workers, keeping wages and living standards much lower than in the United States.

Puerto Rico’s economic decline, which began in the world capitalist depression in the mid-1970s, has taken a nose dive since 2006, as the global crisis further battered the island. To pay the debt owed to U.S. bondholders — now at \$74 billion — the colonial government has slashed 30,000 public employee jobs, cut retirement pensions, hiked sales taxes, closed more than 100 schools and put 266 more on the chopping block, and changed laws to make it easier for bosses to fire workers at will.

U.S. junta: more attacks on workers

“Today the U.S. capitalists are imposing their decisions even more directly on us,” said Angel Figueroa Jaramillo, president of UTIER, the electrical workers union. “We’re fighting the fiscal control board, which now makes the economic decisions in Puerto Rico. To pay the bondholders, they want to carry out even more drastic cuts in social benefits and eliminate rights workers have won.” The board, or junta, as it’s commonly known here, was appointed by President Barack Obama in 2016.

Speaking with us at the UTIER hall in San Juan, Figueroa and union Vice President Freddyson Martínez said the junta and colonial authorities are stepping up pressure to sell off the state-run Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority to private owners. They are seizing on widespread resentment of government mismanagement of the utility, which accounts for \$9 billion of the total debt.

“It’s not a surprise the electrical grid collapsed,” Figueroa said. “Our union had been warning for a long time that



Above, fisherman Luis Velázquez, center, describes what fishermen face from government neglect after Hurricane Maria destroyed their dock to Lenis Rodríguez, right, leader of Yabucoa Support Group, and John Studer, editor of the *Militant*.

more blackouts were bound to happen because of decades of lack of maintenance and reductions in personnel. They let the whole system go downhill.”

“The power authority had reduced inventories to a bare minimum and sold off equipment in order to make debt payments,” Figueroa said. After the storm, they were short of electric poles, cables and other equipment, sharply slowing the process of restoring power.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the electrical company awarded billion-dollar contracts to Cobra Energy and other U.S. contractors to import supplies and deploy line crews. In mid-May, however, the Army Corps suddenly announced it would withdraw its 700 line workers from Puerto Rico, claiming their work was done. That outraged many workers we met in Humacao and Yabucoa, who still had no power.

The social catastrophe and anti-labor attacks have generated mounting anger among working people. Both of the ruling colonial parties responsible for these attacks are deeply discredited.

“We saw the mood of the working class in the May Day marches both this year and last. They were much bigger than in past years, with tens of thousands of marchers,” said José Rodríguez, a union representative for the Solidarity Union Movement (MSS).

The union represents workers at a Pepsi

bottling plant. Fernando Santiago, a Pepsi delivery truck driver and MSS president, told us the union is involved in an effort to organize 1,800 Coca-Cola distribution workers.

The May Day marches also drew university students, who are also feeling the ax. Gabriel Díaz, one of the University of Puerto Rico students who helped lead last year’s student strike, reported that, at the behest of the fiscal board, university tuition will double in August.

“If you’re taking 15 credits, your tuition will jump from \$850 to more than \$1,700 per semester,” he said. “And they’re closing down some student housing that working-class youth from out of town rely on,” said Verónica Figueroa, another University of Puerto Rico student. Díaz and Figueroa are among seven youths who face felony and other charges filed against them by U.S. authorities because of their role in the student protests.

In Humacao: ‘We helped each other’

Our two-day visit to the island’s southeast corner was especially striking, both by how naked the face of the capitalist crisis has become to millions and by working people’s response to it — the resistance, solidarity and creativity.

Hurricane Maria devastated Humacao, a municipality of 52,000 that encompasses the main town and rural communities. When we arrived May 26, thousands of residents and small businesses were still without electricity. Many homes had blue tarps where the roofs had been ripped off, the owners still waiting for aid to rebuild.

We were invited by local residents



to visit the neighborhood of Mariana, reachable by narrow roads that wind up and up the hills.

“For the first week after the hurricane, not a single government official showed up here,” Mariana resident Ivette Díaz told us. Her house was damaged when a neighbor’s home was torn off its foundation and slammed into hers.

“We got no help from the government,” she said. “So neighbors just got together and started to clean up everything.” They cleared debris to reopen the roads. They cleaned up their homes and those of their neighbors.

By the second week some federal agencies showed up, offering each home a few bottles of water.

“The mayor of Humacao came to Mariana a month later. The governor of Puerto Rico arrived in town to inaugurate the Walmart when it reopened, but he’s never come here,” Díaz said.

Her phone service was finally restored in January. She now has electricity; many others in Mariana don’t. “After the storm, if you tried to buy a generator, it could cost \$1,000 to \$2,000,” she said. “The diesel fuel costs \$15 to \$20 a day. It’s just too expensive.”

The leaders of ARECMA, the Recreational and Educational Community Association of Mariana Neighborhood, had offered to take us around the area. We followed Rosalina Abreu, the group’s president, by car to the top of the hill, which offers stunning views of the lush countryside below. She proudly



Left, Annette Aponte shows how containment wall broke behind her house in Yabucoa after storm. **Above**, Mildred Laboy, left, and Rosalina Abreu, leaders of Recreational and Educational Community Association of Mariana Neighborhood. **Top right**, May Day demonstration, San Juan. **Right**, Militant correspondent Martín Koppel describes solidarity and reporting trip to Puerto Rico at June 2 New York Militant Labor Forum, along with John Studer, right.

showed us their facilities.

One wall is decorated with a mural depicting Julia de Burgos, one of Puerto Rico’s foremost poets, that was painted by New York artist Molly Crabapple last October.

Abreu and Mildred Laboy, another leader of ARECMA, told us a little about the organization’s work in Mariana, a neighborhood with 3,200 residents. “Everything this community has won through years of struggle, not handouts,” Abreu said. ARECMA was founded in 1982 but community struggles go back to the 1960s, as they successfully battled to get the government to provide drinking water, electrification and paved roads.

“After the hurricane everything collapsed,” said Laboy, who like Abreu is a retired schoolteacher. “For months, like much of the country, we had no electricity, water, communications, or

medical services. And no jobs.

“Because of our past experience, we weren’t surprised that we got no help from the government. We were ready and began to organize ourselves.” People pushed aside debris to look for their neighbors. They patched up damaged roofs and broken windows.

Abreu proudly showed us the community kitchen they set up, where volunteers serve meals every weekday to people who have no power to cook. At the high point they provided 500 lunches a day. They appealed for and received donations from Puerto Rican communities in the United States.

They showed us the eating area and the water-filtration equipment they set up to provide drinking water. They have raised money for solar panels to run the kitchen and become a little more self-reliant, while fighting for the government to restore service to all. They built recre-



ational facilities with musical and other cultural activities for the children.

Laboy pointed to the class bias of the government’s priorities in Humacao. They first made sure to restore power for the luxury villas in the Palmas del Mar resort and the Ex-Lax and other U.S. pharmaceutical plants in the area.

Protests across island demand power

Abreu said there have been numerous demonstrations in Humacao demanding restoration of electrical service. “There was a torchlight march, and a march on

Continued on page 6

Fidel: Cuba backs fight for Puerto Rico independence

BRIAN WILLIAMS

Cuban revolutionary leader Fidel Castro and the Cuban government have emphatically spoken out in defense of the struggle of Puerto Ricans for freedom from U.S. colonial rule.

“Even before our independence, there had been bonds between Puerto Rico and Cuba,” Castro explained in a May 19, 1977, interview with ABC correspondent Barbara Walters. “The Cuban Revolutionary party, which was the party of independence founded by [José] Martí, comprised Cuba and Puerto Rico.”

“Police beat me because I was participating in a demonstration to support the independence of Puerto Rico,” Castro told Walters, recalling when he was a University of Havana student in the late 1940s. “Some North Americans say that the problem is that the majority of Puerto Ricans do not want independence. Well, 20 or 30 years before U.S. independence, many North Americans did not want the independence of the U.S.”

“We have saved historical, moral, and spiritual bonds with Puerto Rico. And we’ve told them [Washington] that as long as there’s one Puerto Rican who defends the idea of independence, as long as there’s even one, we have the moral and political duty of defending the idea of Puerto Rico’s independence,” Castro said in a speech to Cuba’s National Assembly of People’s Power later that year. “We’ve made this very clear to them, that this is a matter of principle, and to us, principles are not to be negotiated!”

In his closing speech to the founding Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba on Dec. 22, 1975, Castro discussed his reaction to Washington’s “indignant” criticism of Cuba for sponsoring a Conference of Solidarity with Puerto Rico earlier that year.

“What kind of people do they think we are?” he said. “This is the new Cuba, and this is a different country! And until they get this fact into their heads, I cannot see any possibility of improving

relations, because we shall never desert our Puerto Rican brothers and sisters even if there are no relations with the United States for 100 years.”

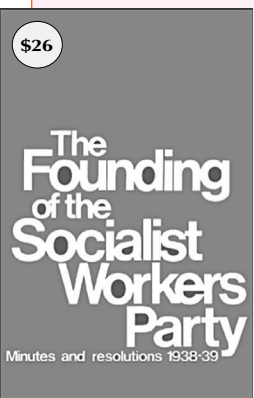
Many Puerto Ricans active in the fight to throw off the U.S. capitalist rulers’ colonial yoke look to the Cuban Revolution as an example to emulate. Longtime independence fighter Rafael Cancel Miranda had just finished writing a poem when he heard the news that Fidel Castro had died in November 2016. “In the name of Puerto Rico and of all those your example will continue to inspire in the struggle for a better world,” Cancel Miranda said, “I gave the poem the title, ‘Thank You, Fidel.’”

The poem begins:

I give thanks to life
for my Boricua skies
my soul, nationalist
my belief, Fidelista
I give thanks to life
For the courage to fight,
For the courage to confront
the imperialist beast.

SWP: Back Puerto Ricans’ fight for self-determination

Below is an excerpt from “Declaration of Principles,” printed in The Founding of the Socialist Workers Party: Minutes and Resolutions, 1938-39. Copyright © 1982 by Pathfinder Press. Reprinted by permission.



United States imperialism, exploiting the masses within its national boundaries, at the same time and to an even greater degree, exploits the peoples of Latin and Central America, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, Liberia, the Philippines. These people are thus the potential allies of the American workers in the struggle against U.S. imperialism, and neither they nor the American workers can expect to win freedom except in joint combat against the common enemy. The SWP supports every progressive struggle of these peoples. It stands for the immediate and unhampered right of self-determination for them, free from military, political, or economic intervention or pressure by the U.S. government. It stands for the immediate and unconditional independence of all the territories, colonies, and dependencies of the U.S. and for the withdrawal of all troops from them. It is opposed to any attempt by American imperialism, open or masked, to infringe upon the right of self-determination of any nation or people.

Available from distributors on page 6 or www.pathfinderpress.com

Puerto Rico: Eyewitness report

Continued from page 5

the bridge between Humacao and Las Piedras,” she said. “Some people went to San Juan to demonstrate in front of government offices.”

Similar actions took place across the island. In just one week in December, the press reported 17 marches, picket lines, road blockades and other actions, from San Juan to Isabela in the west, Salinas in the south, and Caguas in the center of the island.

“Just in Mariana they closed four schools, and we have one elementary school left. Now some kids have to travel 5 kilometers [3 miles] to and from school. Transportation is more difficult in rural areas,” Abreu said.

Laboy took us to another part of Mariana where her brother Raúl “Ruly” Laboy was helping rebuild another brother’s house whose roof was ripped off and windows shattered by the storm.

The retired electrician explained that many who applied to the Federal Emergency Management Agency for aid to rebuild their homes have been turned down. The U.S. agency demands property deeds and other documents that many in rural areas don’t have. “If you don’t have a deed you have to hire a land surveyor and go to court. It can take 10 years and a lot of money to get legal documents to prove you own a house that belonged to your grandfather,” he said.

Despite the challenges, said Raúl Laboy, “I’m not going anywhere. I’m staying right here. We rely on working-class solidarity and that makes me happy.”

He was excited to meet two members of the Socialist Workers Party from the U.S. Like many others we met, he subscribed to the *Militant* and purchased some books we brought by SWP leaders on revolutionary politics.

While Raúl Laboy is a veteran socialist, a supporter of revolutionary Cuba and an advocate of independence for Puerto Rico, we got a similar response from other workers who didn’t have a political background. They were interested to hear about the recent wave of teachers strikes across the U.S. They were open and in many cases attracted to the revolutionary working-class perspective we discussed with them. *Is Socialist Revolution in the US Possible?* was the most popular book we showed people.

Struggles in Yabucoa

The next day we went to the coastal town of Yabucoa, 20 minutes south of Humacao. You can see the island of Vieques — for decades a target of U.S. Navy practice bombings and of protests by residents that finally stopped them. It’s where Hurricane Maria made direct landfall and where some 60 percent of homes still had no electricity when we were there. Lenis Rodríguez organized a full day of visits for us in different rural neighborhoods.

Rodríguez has been a leader of Yabucoa Support Group, a community organization, for the past 13 years. After the storm hit, he and others in the group went into action to recruit volunteers to help bring food and supplies to neighbors and residents of other communities. In March he organized the “march of the flashlights,” which inspired similar protests in Humacao and other areas demanding the government restore power.

“You can see a class bias here,” Rodríguez said. “People in these areas don’t get attention that other classes get.”

In the neighborhood of Tejas, in the hills above the main town, we were invited into the home of Annette Aponte, a teacher. We also met her brother Bedwin, a manufacturing worker, and her elderly parents, Mario Aponte and Justa Serrano. They were eager to talk to *Militant* reporters “so people in the United States can hear what we’re going through,” Annette said.

Mario is a living history of the Puerto Rican working class. Today he is in frail health, but he came alive telling us how as a teenager in the early 1960s he had cut sugarcane with a machete when the big Roig sugar mill in Yabucoa was still running. Then, like tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans in the 1950s, he migrated to the United States and got jobs as a farmworker in New Jersey. He also worked at the Union Carbide electrode plant in Yabucoa that later closed.

Serrano described what happened last Sept. 20 when the hurricane barreled into Yabucoa. Their front gate and windows were blown out and the house, which sits

on a hill, was shaking. Shortly after the storm, the containment wall behind the house broke and slid down the hill. They were afraid the house would follow it.

“Two or three days later, when the road was reopened, we were able to go down to the town and ask for a tarp to reinforce the ground behind the house. But the mayor’s office refused us any help,” Annette Aponte said. Finally a pastor gave them a tarp.

She was out of work and without income for three months after the storm. “We went to FEMA to ask for financial help to rebuild the containment wall,” she said. “They turned us down twice but we kept appealing. The third FEMA inspector asked for documents, then more documents, to certify that it was my father’s house. We gave them the papers. We’re still waiting for FEMA to reply.”

The Tejas neighborhood was still without power when we visited. “My father has diabetes and we need ice to keep his insulin supply refrigerated,” she said.

“But the mayor of Yabucoa hasn’t even bothered to come up here, and he’s been slow in responding to our needs,” Aponte said. She told us she thinks part of the reason is that he represents the Popular Democratic Party while most Tejas residents voted for the rival, pro-statehood party. Patronage politics by both colonial parties has a long history in Puerto Rico.

Actions against school closures

Aponte said that the government in Yabucoa had announced that five schools would be closed. “Parents and students went into the streets to protest, and they were able to save two of the schools.”

As she waved goodbye to us from her front entrance, next to her was a large Puerto Rican flag hanging on the outside wall. Since the storm working people across the island have displayed the flag on their homes and cars. It means: “We survived, we’re determined to rebuild, we’re staying here in our country.”

Next we visited Orlando and Aida Ramos in the neighborhood of Ingenio, which is “sugar mill” in Spanish. Born in the Bronx and moving here as a child, Orlando worked in the mid-1970s at the nearby Roig sugar mill; earlier we had stopped to see the long-abandoned buildings that sit today as giant rusting hulks. He later worked hanging chickens in poultry plants. Aida worked in poultry plants in Massachusetts and garment shops in Puerto Rico.

Aida Ramos reported that just two days earlier the first repair crews from Cobra had arrived in the neighborhood, installing electric poles. We saw them driving around. But eight months without power has taken a toll on working people here.

“A neighbor who was in ill health died yesterday,” Orlando said. “Not having electricity has an impact. It means no air conditioning. Food spoils and ice melts. It means no oxygen machines. And no TV to relieve the mental stress everyone has been going through.”

Several other workers told us of relatives or neigh-



Victoria 840 Radio

June 3 protest against government threat to close school in Yabucoa, Puerto Rico.

bors who had died over the past months as a result of similar conditions, either at home or at medical facilities crippled by the storm.

Like others we spoke with, Orlando appreciated the discussion about the capitalist crisis we face both in Puerto Rico and the U.S., and how workers can unite to fight more effectively today. He said he looked forward to us coming back. “Let me know when and I’ll fire up the barbecue,” he said.

Fishermen’s struggles

Lenis Rodríguez introduced us to Luis “Cheverito” Velázquez, a local fisherman. Velázquez told us that fishermen, who are organized into associations in many coastal towns, have had to fight for basic things like getting the local government to build a small dock.

Hurricane Maria destroyed the little dock — along with fishing traps and other equipment — and now Velázquez and others have to launch their boats from the beach. A fellow fisherman who has electricity makes his refrigerator available so they can store their catch.

Cheverito, as everyone calls him, goes fishing on his 16-foot boat with two other crew members at least once a week. He also works full time as a janitor at the school in Punta Santiago and is active in the union. “It’s a poor neighborhood where most of the kids come from families of fishermen,” he said.

After the hurricane wiped out the school, Cheverito and other janitors, joined by parents and volunteers, worked overtime to clean it up, turning it into a place people could gather in and use.

Velázquez sometimes fishes off nearby Vieques. “The water is still contaminated with shells and other waste left from when the U.S. Navy used Vieques for target practice until we forced them to stop,” he said.

He’s a veteran of those battles, pioneered by fishermen, that eventually led the U.S. military to leave Vieques in 2003. “It was truly David and Goliath — the fishermen with their little boats and their slingshots standing up to the Navy with their giant ships and resources,” he said. “And we won.”

He says when we come back he’ll take us to meet fishermen in Vieques.

Rebuilding after the storm is one more battle. “I’ve been fighting all my life, Cheverito said. “And today I’m still fighting. I’m staying here.”

IF YOU LIKE THIS PAPER, LOOK US UP

Where to find distributors of the *Militant*, *New International*, and a full display of Pathfinder books.

UNITED STATES

CALIFORNIA: Oakland: 675 Hegenberger Road, Suite 250. Zip: 94621. Tel: (510) 686-1351. Email: swpOak@sbcglobal.net **Los Angeles:** 2826 S. Vermont. Suite 1. Zip: 90007. Tel: (323) 643-4968. Email: swpla@att.net

FLORIDA: Miami: P.O. Box 380641 Zip: 33238. Tel: (305) 420-5928. Email: swpmiami@icloud.com

GEORGIA: Atlanta: 777 Cleveland Ave. SW Suite 103. Zip: 30315. Tel: (678) 528-7828. Email: swpatlanta@bellsouth.net

ILLINOIS: Chicago: 1858 W. Cermak Road, 2nd floor. Zip: 60608. Tel: (312) 455-0111. Email: SWPChicago@fastmail.fm

MINNESOTA: St. Paul: 1821 University Ave. W Suite S-106A. Zip: 55104. Tel: (651) 340-5586. Email: twincities.swp@gmail.com

NEBRASKA: Lincoln: P.O. Box 6811. Zip: 68506. Tel: (402) 217-4906. Email: swplincoln@windstream.net

NEW YORK: New York: 306 W. 37th St., 13th Floor. Zip: 10018. Tel: (646) 964-4793. Email: newyorkswp@gmail.com **Albany:** P.O. Box 8304. Zip: 12208. Tel: (518) 903-0781. Email: albanyswp@gmail.com

PENNSYLVANIA: Philadelphia: 2824 Cottman Ave., Suite 16. Zip: 19149. Tel: (215) 708-1270. Email: philaswp@verizon.net

TEXAS: Dallas: dallasswp@gmail.com

WASHINGTON, D.C.: 7603 Georgia Ave. NW, Suite 300. Zip: 20012. Tel: (202) 536-5080. Email: swp.washingtondc@verizon.net

WASHINGTON: Seattle: 5418 Rainier Ave. South. Zip: 98118-2439. Tel: (206) 323-1755. Email: swpseattle@gmail.com

AUSTRALIA

Sydney: Suite 22, 10 Bridge St., Granville, NSW 2142. Tel: (02) 8677 0108. Email: cl_australia@optusnet.com.au

CANADA

QUEBEC: Montreal: 7107 St. Denis #204 H2S 2S5. Tel: (514) 272-5840. Email: cllcmontreal@fastmail.com **BRITISH COLUMBIA: Vancouver:** 190 E. 48th Ave., Suite 201A. V5W 2C8. Tel: (604) 322-4223. Email: cllcVancouver@fastmail.fm

FRANCE

Paris: BP 10130, 75723 Paris Cedex 15. Email: militant.paris@gmail.com

NEW ZEALAND

Auckland: 188a Onehunga Mall, Onehunga. Postal address: P.O. Box 13857, Auckland 1643. Tel: (09) 636-3231. Email: clauack@xtra.co.nz

UNITED KINGDOM

ENGLAND: London: 2nd Floor, 83 Kingsland High St., Dalston. Postal code: E8 2PB. Tel: (020) 3583-3553. Email: cllondon@fastmail.fm **Manchester:** Room 301, 3rd floor, Hilton House, 26–28 Hilton St. Postal code: M1 2EH. Tel: (016) 1478-2496. Email: clmanchr@gmail.com