

# Puerto Rico Shows Us How to Win *Strikes and Protests Force Out Roselló*

July 25

*“No nos vamos a cansar, te vamos a sacar”* (We will not tire, we will remove you) shouted demonstrators in Puerto Rico. And they were right. The detested Governor Ricardo Rosselló has announced he will resign as of August 2nd. Whether that will satisfy the demands of the protesters is yet to be seen.

“The only good thing you did was to unite the people,” read one sign on the demonstration. The demonstrations on the 17<sup>th</sup> were the biggest in Puerto Rican history up to that point (see the guest analysis by José Hernández in this issue), but the demonstrations on the 22nd were even larger (see the eyewitness report below by Pabsi Livman). Numbers were swollen by a general strike called by major unions. After unions called the strike, even small shops closed their doors for the day.

The meteoric rise of the #Ricky-Renuncia movement and the stunning resignation of the governor only 14 days into the movement is a loud and thunderous reminder of the power workers and ordinary people have to take charge of their destinies.

## Colonialism

After the Spanish American War, the US annexed Puerto Rico and it became a colony after 1917. The Jones Act, introduced in 1920, requires all goods shipped to the island come on U.S.-flagged ships departing from a U.S. port. Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, but have not had full citizen rights. Residents of Puerto Rico can’t vote in federal elections, and the U.S. government can overrule any decision voted in locally by the governor and the assembly.

Since 2016 Puerto Rico has been ruled by a seven-member unelected Fiscal Control Board

created by the U.S. Congress. Members of the Board (called the Junta in PR) represent the banking sector, hedge funds, and the international bourgeoisie in general. They have imposed a program of austerity that has cut wages, raided pensions and dismantled services, spreading poverty and making the country more vulnerable to Hurricane Maria. Response to the hurricane was famously mismanaged by the governor, by FEMA and underfunded by the racist policies of Donald Trump. Afterwards, US vulture capitalist firms swept in to make another killing off the country’s debt. *(continued page 2)*



*The Puerto Rican Center for Investigative Journalism (CPIPR) reported 500,000 demonstrators on the streets July 22 in a country of about 3 million. Photo by Alonso Sambolín*

The cruelty of this policy of diverting money away from social spending and towards Wall Street and international Capital was surely the background of the recent movement that climaxed with a general strike called by unions on Monday. Major players in this strike were two important unions with a long history of fightbacks: the *Asociación de Maestros de Puerto Rico* (the teachers union, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers), and the *Unión de Trabajadores de la Industria Eléctrica y Riego* (UTIER, the electrical workers' union). As of the writing of this article, the UTIER has vowed to continue protests against all corrupt players, even vowing to take on the "junta" itself. In the wake of this victory, workers have become confident in their own power and the next logical target is the Junta.

Under the Junta's watch, a series of privatizations of schools and harsh cuts in wages and pensions occurred. There were simultaneous attacks on labor unions, to try and dissolve them. The Junta implemented a series of harsh cuts in wages and pensions. The former secretary of Education Julia Kehele, whose annual salary was \$250,000 was arrested on charges of corruption just before the protests erupted. Her job was to oversee the closing of 442 public schools in Puerto Rico. This meant that in post-Hurricane Maria, 75,000 school children were forced to walk miles—through dangerous conditions of crumbling roads and infrastructure—to get to school in overcrowded facilities while their old schools sat empty. 5,000 untenured teachers were also fired. This was all too typical of the Junta's makeup and its working.

## Hurricane

In September 2017, after Hurricane Maria slammed into Puerto Rico causing unimaginable suffering and enormous structural damage, it became clear that the lack of sufficient response by FEMA, the Trump administration and the governor were the main cause of deaths. People in need of life-saving medication went without it. There was no access to drinking water and food as both food and water that was sent sat in empty fields or in containers rotting away. The harsh austerity cuts since 2016 but also the disadvantage of the Puerto Rican economy due to the crippling effects of the Jones Act of 1920 and the Colonial Status left Puerto Ricans vulnerable.

The 1998 privatization of the national telephone company sparked a long all-out strike by Puerto Rico's two telephone unions, and they were joined for a general strike and shutdown called the "Peoples' Strike," which showed the potential power of Puerto Rican's workers. Unfortunately, that strike did not reverse the privatization, as workers were called back to work amidst cries of a "sell out."

This was all crucial background to the recent scandals that brought half a million into the streets, brought out the unions, and brought down the Governor. Now the new general strike, the even larger and broader demonstrations, and the victory against Rosselló has given new confidence to unionized workers, and other working class Puerto Ricans. It will be difficult to corral this confidence and anger back to politics as usual.

When the demonstrations began, Rosselló (who was elected with

just over 40% of the vote) stonewalled, claiming it was a question of "democracy" not to give in, and set the police on the demonstrators. Then on Sunday said he would not seek re-election next year and would step down as head of the New Progressive Party but the concessions still failed to appease demonstrators. Then late on Wednesday Rosselló announced he would resign effective August 2nd. The protests erupted in celebration, chanting "Ricky, te botamos!" (Ricky, we kicked you out). But this is not the end.

## #WandaRenuncia

Rosselló also announced his loyal third in line, Secretary of Justice Wanda Vázquez would succeed him. (His second in line has already resigned and been indicted for corruption). Puerto Rican women's groups have been very critical of Vázquez for not speaking out about gender violence, even while she was in the Office of Women's Affairs and during the sit-in outside Rosselló's office on the issue. Saadi Rosado of the Feminist Collective said "She failed to address gender violence issues and was another piece of government bureaucracy." During her years as Secretary of Justice Vázquez faced ethical complaints by the Independent Special Prosecutor, and was seen as dragging her feet on investigating corruption allegations in her own party. The hashtag #Wanda-Renuncia started trending immediately after Rosselló's address ended.

Another puppet to the same masters will not answer the people's anger. Throughout the modern period, Puerto Rico's neo-liberal governments — whether Ricky Rosselló's PPD (Popular

Democratic Party, linked to the Democratic Party in the U.S.), or the PNP (New Progressive Party, connected to the Republicans)—all reacted to the crisis with more austerity.

In the demonstrations a large banner from the *Asociación de Maestros de Puerto Rico* read “*Ricky renuncia y llévate la Junta*” (Ricky resign and take the Junta with you) and this chant was taken up repeatedly by the crowds.

If the people in the streets can unite with the militancy of the Puerto Rican university occupations, the power of the school strikes in 2018 and the People’s Strike of 1998, the long-time movement for Puerto Rican independence and recent movement against gender violence, we will see a force that could sweep away not just one governor, but the Junta — and take on the decades of colonial rule and neoliberal capitalism it represents.

*Iannis Delatolas and Eric Fred*



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# *Eyewitness from the general strike in Puerto Rico*

*Pabsi Livmar describes the demonstrations and the general strike of July 22<sup>nd</sup>, and asks participants why they took to the streets*

By now, the whole world has seen the pictures from the demonstrations that have been going on for more than a week in Puerto Rico. It’s clear at last and after long decades of relative quiet, that the country has risen up against corruption and austerity. We’ve walked for miles under the scorching heat of the sun and in the humid tropical air. Some of us have fainted, many have been arrested. And then, in a vain attempt to silence us and invalidate our demands, the police hit us with their batons, spray us with pepper spray and lob tear gas at us.

#RickyRenuncia, a social media movement, has become our daily bread. At eight in the evening, every single day, the banging of pots and pans resounds as strongly as the chant of the coquí. This is our way of demonstrating peacefully from our homes. In a nutshell, the whole country is paralyzed. We wait to hear confirmation of the rumors swirling about. We rely on social media and online newspapers, on news reports from independent journalists who are doing a great job covering this historical and unprecedented event. Public figures like Rey Charlie, Bad Bunny, Residente (René Pérez), and the #CacerolaGirl have become national heroes of the moment. The memes, of course, spare us a mental health crisis as we hear the news that breaks practically every fifteen minutes: more cases of corruption probe, resignations in the Partido Nuevo Progresista (New Progressive Party), politicians, artists and powerful people demanding Governor Rossello’s resignation or his impeachment.

Life for Puerto Ricans has been very hard, which helps to explain these collective feelings of anxiety and disappointment. But now, we are witnessing an awakening that is leaving a profound mark on us, giving us strength and uniting us more than ever before.

These demonstrations started on July 13 and have been taking place day and night. People who have never marched before are now marching: not only the young fighting for a better future, but people from the countryside and from tiny villages, residents of the towns and the projects, teachers and children, parents and grandparents, including those who had voted for the very same Rosselló. They come walking, by car or by bus, truck, boat and on horseback.

*Voices from the general strike, continued page 5*

# *Puerto Rico revolts against corruption and austerity*

*Analysis by José Hernández, July 20*

As of this writing, the people of Puerto Rico have been protesting for seven days straight on the streets of San Juan, and in ever growing numbers. The fury unleashed by the scandals exposing the corruption and political intrigue of the governor Ricardo Rosselló shows no signs of abating. Adding to that, was the total mismanagement of the recovery following in the wake of Hurricane Maria. A combination of colonialism, the racism of the Trump administration, the neoliberal agenda of the Financial Oversight and Management Board (aka “la Junta”), and the incompetence of Rosselló’s administration, were all ingredients simmering beneath the surface. Finally what made the whole pot boil over were the leaks of the private messages exchanged by Rosselló and his cronies, revealed the extent of their crassness and the total disdain they have for the poor, for women, for LGBTQ+ people, and other oppressed sections of society.

The movement is now spreading to the rest of the island, involving workers and ordinary people. The last time mass protests had rocked the island was in 1999 in San Juan over Vieques, demanding the removal of the US Navy presence there. So today the protesters are united in demanding Rosselló’s resignation. Something big is happening here: ordinary people have now taken center stage as political parties are scrambling to keep up.

Ever since then, only the tragedy brought by Hurricane María (the worst hurricane to affect the island on record, with over 4,645 deaths resulting from its aftermath) seemed to unite Puerto Rican society in just one voice. People lived this nightmare for months having no electricity, no running and drinking water, no access to ATM’s to withdraw cash. People had no access to healthcare and medicine, leading to thousands of deaths. Thousands of homes remained without roofs as the promised tarps were not delivered. All these forced thousands of Puerto Ricans to migrate to the United States as refugees. After two years of inefficient and often scandalous Rosselló administration, Puerto Ricans have rallied together to demand his resignation or—should he decide to stick to his position—impeach him. What is going on in Puerto Rico? What triggered this ongoing series of protests?

## **1. The backstory: Political intrigue**

A month ago, on June 24, Raúl Maldonado, Treasury Secretary and Chief Financial Officer of Puerto Rico went live on radio to accuse a group of government workers inside the Department of Treasury of operating “an institutional mafia” who were also attempting to bribe him. He also confirmed that he was cooperating with the FBI to dismantle this “mafia”.

A few hours after the interview aired on WKAQ 580, governor Ricardo Rosselló held a press conference and announced the immediate removal of Raúl Maldonado from all offices held for failing to inform the Governor of the illegal acts he was denouncing. Governor Rosselló stated that Raúl Maldonado had lost his trust and encouraged him to bring forth all the information to the authorities.

Raúl Maldonado’s son – Raúl Maldonado-Gautier – went public on Facebook and accused the governor of corruption. The governor, he alleged, had met with Fernando Scherrer-Caillet (then President of BDO, an accounting firm) to ask that a report affecting his wife be edited. He also accused Rosselló of receiving payment from BDO. Maldonado-Gautier then went on to accuse the State Police of persecuting him in an attempt to silence him, which led to the current police commissioner (and former bodyguard to Governor Rosselló) to admit that this was the case.

## **2. Deeply embedded corruption**

Nothing might have come of the whole affair but for the fact that these accusations shone light on the arrests of Julia Keleher and Ángela Ávila-Marrero, former Education Secretary and former head of the Health Administration respectively on July 10. Alongside them was the arrest of Fernando Scherrer-Caillet, the same businessman who worked closely with



Rosselló. Altogether, they faced 32 counts of money laundering and defrauding the federal government. These arrests are crucial to understand the current state of the popular anger because these are the very officials who represent the face of Rosselló's electoral and economic programs.

Julia Keleher was appointed by Governor Rosselló to lead a so-called educational reform that was nothing more than a privatization project, meeting with huge resistance across Puerto Rico. Her top down managerial decision-making, her hasty restructuring of the Department of Education leading to the closing of 283 schools and the forced transfer of employees put her at odds with the two main teachers' unions, the *Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico* and the *Asociación de Maestros de Puerto Rico*. To make matters worse, with full support from Governor Rosselló, she pushed for the establishment of charter schools and a voucher system to underrepresented students wishing to study in private schools. Teachers unions rightly attacked her plan as nothing less than the dismantlement of public education, a fight similarly taken up by teachers' unions on the mainland.

Ángela Ávila-Marrero was heading the Administration of Health Insurances of Puerto Rico, created out of the dismantled Department of Health. Back in the early '90s, Pedro Rosselló's administration (father of Ricardo Rosselló) had privatized public hospitals and launched a universal health insurance. The privatization of hospitals was met with widespread opposition, but the launching of universal health insurance was welcomed. However, Puerto Rico was deep in debt, and the burden of healthcare (with Puerto

## Voices from the general strike

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Here's why they participated in these protests, taking to the streets to raise their voices. This is what they told us:

Ana Castillo Muñoz

*Journalist and writer, 29 years old*

I came to the demonstration not only to demand that the governor resigns, but also to represent all the girls and women who could not be here. Besides the resignation of Ricardo Rosselló, we want to raise our concern for the schools that were closed down, the health services that stopped being offered, the displacements. The resignation of the governor is not everything.

Diana Bernard

*Director of a Puerto Rican Publishing House, 53 years old*

I have joined the legitimate demands of the nation in asking for the resignation of the governor of Puerto Rico, Ricardo Rosselló, who leads an administration tainted by corruption, lacking empathy towards the citizens, and incapable of addressing Puerto Rico's most pressing needs. Today (July 22), in this demonstration, we also demand from the Chamber of Representatives and the Senate that they meet their responsibilities and impeach the Governor; that they put the people before any other political consideration. And we remind them that we will not lose sight of them. We will be here until our demands are met.

Tere Marichal-Lugo

*Storyteller, 63 years old*

In the face of the situation that the country is living, nobody can turn a blind eye and wash their hands of it. We have to take it to the street and express our rejection of the colonial government and its long streak of abusive acts. As I am a storyteller, I have to be a part of this tale and tell what they have done to us, and how we have outgrown and resisted these colonial administrations.

Ferdinand Rivera

*Logistics Specialist, Federal Government, 34 years old*

I'm also marching for those friends and relatives that were forced to leave the island due to the lack of opportunities and with no expectation of progress. I'm marching for the souls that departed after Hurricane María and who were forgotten by this corrupt regime that we live under. I'm marching for a better Puerto Rico and a better future that we deserve.

*More voices from the general strike, continued page 6.*

Rico receiving only a tenth of what similar states received from the federal government, such as Mis

issippi) fell squarely on Puerto Ricans. To finance – among other things – universal health insurance,

Pedro Rosselló and subsequent governors made unsustainable loans leading to bankruptcy and the current unpayable debt.

Because education and health are at the heart of national concerns in Puerto Rico, the news of their arrest created a shockwave in San Juan. Immediately, voices raised to urge Roselló to step down, including from Congressman Raúl Grijalva (President of the Natural Resource Committee which oversees US territories). Clearly, a storm was brewing and Rosselló had no choice but to cut short his vacation in France.

This time, it looked that the governor wouldn't be able to paper over these latest scandals. Not only were these women the face of Puerto Ricans' day-to-day suffering, but this was compounded by the blatant hypocrisy of the mantra of "transparency" constantly invoked by the Rosselló's administration.

The media covered the arrests extensively. Of course, these were not isolated cases. People were still living with the utter devastation that Hurricane Maria had left in its wake, almost 2 years later. And then there was the mind boggling \$300 million no-bid contract to restore the whole of the island's power grid, given to the WhiteFish Energy Company of Montana. This was a 2-men outfit with no experience but connections to the disgraced Secretary of the Interior, Ryan Zinke, and who charged more than double the going rates! These were only a couple of the most egregious examples of corruption under the Rossalló regime.

### 3. Chatgate

And then, there were the chats on Telegram, a chat app apparently used extensively by Rosselló and a coterie of members of his adminis-

## Voices from the general strike

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Lcda. Gisela E. Sánchez Alemán  
*Attorney-at-Law, 27 years old*

I demonstrate because I am part of a people that has had it with corruption, apathy and disrespect of those who are meant to lead us. We fight for a better future so that our current official leaders – and those to come – understand that they were elected to work for the best interests of Puerto Rico, not for their own personal interests. I demonstrate and will continue to do so because it is time to let these politicians know that, from now on, they will be held accountable for their actions.

Ana María Fuster Lavín  
*Writer and legal and legal proofreader, 51 years old*

I have been participating in rallies and marches since the 1980s. I believe in the struggle of the people and free speech. This time, I do it out of indignation and as a militant against the outrageous corruption of the governor's group of friends; for the way they treated us and made a mockery of us after Hurricane María; for the nearly five thousand dead people that they mocked in their private chats; for the destruction of our public education system and the University of Puerto Rico; for the crass conspiracy against the people, against the members of the Pro-Independence Party, especially for the late [Carlos] Gallissá; for conspiring to manipulate the Judiciary Power and the press; for their homophobia, misogyny and fatphobia, because we women are full of life and a fighting spirit.

Isabel Ortiz López  
*Student at the University of Puerto Rico, 22 years old*

I am protesting because for much too long the Puerto Rican people had given up, believing "that such was life". Our progress as a nation has stagnated because of our colonial status. But anyone can see now that it has not kept us from creating a strong and unified definition of what it is to be Puerto Rican: that unmistakable pride is what has united us in the Las Américas Highway on July 22, and what will continue to keep together until Puerto Rico becomes the nation that we all hold dear in our hearts.

*Text and interviews: Pabsi Livmar*

tration. When these were leaked to the public (perhaps by Maldonado-Gautier himself), Puerto Rico exploded with rage and fury. This was a group of twelve male members of government colluding to ruin the reputation of political adversaries, sharing confidential in

formation that would benefit members of the chat, and cooking up ways to change the "narrative" of social issues. All of this was enough to justify the scandal and the eventual collapse of the Rosselló administration. It was however the vulgarity, the profanity, the

unfiltered expression of homophobia and misogyny that created such an immense shockwave in Puerto Rico.

The first story leaked allowed Puerto Ricans to discover how Governor Rosselló behaved with his inner circle. The crass language, calling former New York City Council Speaker a “whore”, making fun of the dead after hurricane Maria, using homophobic slurs against politicians and singer Ricky Martin, proved to be the match thrown into a smoldering fire.

#### 4. Puerto Rico Takes It to the Streets

Demands for Rosselló’s resignation came in fast. *Colectiva Feminista en Construcción* organized a protest awaiting the governor at the airport but he was able to avoid them and barricaded himself in La Fortaleza. As 889 pages worth of chat were published by the Center for Investigative Journalism, the movement quickly gained traction. On Sunday July 14, public workers (from Electric Authority (UTIER)

and teachers (FMPR) organized a joint demonstration that went without incidents. On Monday July 15, artists took the initiative and encouraged Puerto Ricans to keep demonstrating. Responding to the call, more than 20,000 people gathered peacefully until the Riot Police was deployed. American journalist David Begnaud was live when the clashes happened. He thought it was quite likely that the police provoked the clashes. For the first time in decades, Puerto Ricans were not willing to back down. Puerto Ricans declared themselves ready to fight this corrupt administration. They chanted “No tenemos miedo. Somos más” (We are not afraid. There are more of us.) their voices resonating in the streets of Old San Juan. They hurled incendiary objects, stones, and bricks in response to the tear gas and pepper spray the police threw at them.

#### 5. Redefining “democracy”

In the aftermath of this confrontation, Old San Juan looked like a battlefield. Police Commissioner

Henry Escalera held a press conference. When questioned about the heavy handed use of tear gas and pepper spray, he blamed the demonstrators and offered the country an interesting definition about the meaning of democracy:

“We are here to ensure the right to free speech. We are here to guarantee their right to free speech and look what they have done. This is not a democracy. Hurting (others), throwing tear gas, throwing cobblestones, throwing cherry bombs, this is not democracy. This is a democratic country, a democratic government, and we will defend it to the last man standing. We are prepared to defend democracy whatever the consequences, to the last drop of blood. The police, these men and women are here to defend democracy and we will do so.”

His words and his attempt to change the narrative of events did not go unnoticed by demonstrators who accepted the challenge. On Wednesday July 17, 500,000 people from all walks of life – including singers Ricky Martin, Residente and Bad Bunny and actor Benicio del Toro – took to the streets of Old San Juan where La Fortaleza is located. “We will fight till the last drop of blood” and “We are not afraid. There are more of us.” were to be heard everywhere. Puerto Ricans were making it known to those in power that ***This is what democracy looks like!***

The next morning, Governor Rosselló was forced to acknowledge the importance of the demonstration. However, he insisted he would not resign and that it was his duty to protect the constitution (though he made no mention of how the constitution could be used to impeach him!)

At this point, Puerto Rico is in full mode rebellion, redefining



Organized drivers brought the country’s major highway to a halt with caravans of trucks, small and huge, and tractors. Photo by Alonso Sambolín



democracy from below, where misogyny, homophobia, corruption and predatory capitalism are not part of the equation.

Things are moving at a fast pace. Last night, workers unions joined the protest by organizing a massive demonstration in front of La Fortaleza, the governor's mansion and yet again made it clear that they would remain there until he stepped down. This time around, there was no violence and riot police did not charge with tear gas. Perhaps, the strategy of using undercover agents to infiltrate the protests in order to turn public opinion against the demonstrators (as alleged by the ACLU) is not working anymore. As this article is being written protests are spreading to Ponce and Caguas. What this movement has done is to delegitimize a corrupt ruling class that had bet on privatization and austerity. This was in a country already living under the oppressive rules of a colonial power as represented by the Junta, appointed by the United States Congress, not the people of Puerto Rico.

The movement has given Roselló until Sunday to resign and in preparation they're mobilizing for yet another massive demonstration. This is a movement reminiscent of the very recent struggles in other parts of the world. Ordinary people from all walks of life in Algeria, in the Sudan and most recently in Hong Kong have shown the power

of protests to confront corruption and despotism. The exact tipping point that brings hundreds of thousands onto the streets may not be predictable. However, what is certain is that when it happens, the need to be organized in rallying our forces against a very powerful opponent becomes extremely apparent.



..and they kept coming. July 17<sup>th</sup>, San Juan

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