

Puerto Rican teachers strike over privatization



San Juan, August 16 (RHC)-- Last Monday was the first day of school in Puerto Rico, and it was a disorganized and chaotic disaster thanks to the government's cruel assault on public education. More than 250 public schools, many of them in excellent condition and with full enrollment, have been shut down, over the objections of their communities.

According to an article in the publication Socialist Worker by Monique Dols, teachers set a different tone on Wednesday with a one-day strike to save their schools.

Eleven months after Hurricane María struck, there are signs everywhere of how a system with upside-down priorities made the natural disaster so much worse — but education is an especially clear example.

In the weeks leading up to the opening of schools August 13, the courts had the opportunity to rule in favor of the children of Puerto Rico and against disaster capitalism .. but they failed to do so again and again.

Dol said that the situation on the ground in Puerto Rico is gut-wrenching. Fully functioning schools with intact campuses and capable and loving school staff have been closed and their students reassigned to new schools that, through no fault of their own, simply don't have the space, capacity, supplies and tools needed to begin instruction.

One receiver school in Mayagüez, La Escuela Manel A. Barreto, opened on Monday with a section of the school still without a roof, debris and garbage in the corridors, and classrooms without chairs, teachers or teaching materials. The school received students from three closed schools that were all in good condition and fully staffed with qualified teachers.

In many locations, school simply didn't start in full. In some instances, the Department of Education has planned on half-day instruction in order to accommodate large numbers of students. Where classes were able to start, students in now-overcrowded receiver schools are being taught in cramped classroom spaces often shared across grades — or, in some cases, outside in the scorching heat. For example, children in a fourth-grade class in Aguadilla crowded into a small gazebo for their first day of school.

Despite the overcrowding, some 2,700 teachers were left unassigned at the start of the school year. Hundreds of teachers reassigned to new schools didn't have any space in which to work with children.

In the week before schools opened, thousands of untenured teachers were subjected to humiliation and abuse, forced to wait for hours in the heat to take a required drug test. Untenured teachers, no matter what level of experience they have, essentially have to be rehired every year. Many still have no assignment this year despite the vacant teaching positions at hundreds of schools.

The Department of Education has come under intense scrutiny for announcing the purchase of temporary FEMA trailers to be used as classrooms. According to a document obtained by the Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico, each trailer costs the department \$42,050. Officials have announced they will need about 200 trailers.

The irrationality is lost on no one: One of the primary reasons given for school closures was under-enrollment. But now the Department of Education is spending millions on trailers while closed schools in excellent condition remain shuttered.

The chaos caused by Secretary of Education Julia Keleher and her department has impacted all public school students. But it has been particularly hard on students in special education programs. Children with special needs have been abandoned — left without school assignments in some cases, and without transportation to schools when they have been reassigned.

Educators and parents from one school slated for closure, the highly regarded Lorencita Ramírez School, are furious that students with special needs have no help to draw on in their new school placement.

The Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico (FMPR) called for a one-day strike on August 15, and is working in coalition with other forces that want to stop the frontal assaults on public education.

During the year since María hit Puerto Rico, and in fact for years before, the FMPR has been involved in struggle after struggle to stop closures and make schools into a site of resistance to the privatizers. In the days after the hurricane hit, the union was already in touch with educators in New Orleans to learn about how the disaster capitalists would exploit Puerto Rico's tragedy.

The larger and better-funded Asociación de Maestros, which is the local affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), has done very little to oppose privatization of the public school system. This won't come as a surprise to U.S.-based teachers who have seen the AFT sitting at the table with education privatizers for years — and with little to show for it, but worse working conditions and crumbling schools.

Now, in Puerto Rico, the privatization effort is underway in earnest with the announcement of the first charter in the gentrifying university neighborhood of Río Piedras in San Juan.

As teachers went out on strike on August 15, the media tried to blame them for disrupting the education of children. But there is nothing that the teachers of Puerto Rico could do that could be more of a disruption to their students than what the Secretary of Education and her boss, Gov. Roselló, have already done and are continuing to do.

On August 15, educators, with the support of their communities, walked out for dignity and respect, and to keep education in Puerto Rico public. They are demanding that the more than \$500 million in federal dollars promised for education in Puerto Rico be used to build the schools that children deserve, not overblown administrators' salaries and FEMA trailers.

Puerto Rican teachers demand that they receive the salary increase promised by Roselló, and that unassigned teachers be reinstated. They demand that the department honor seniority rights when making job placements. They want the rollback of school closures and small class sizes, with a maximum ratio of 20 students for every teacher. And they demand an end to the charterization of the school system and the removal of Keleher as Secretary of Education.

On Wednesday, August 15th, the educators of Puerto Rico taught us all one of the most important life lessons: While we don't know what the future will bring, we don't have to settle for the present. When we stand up and fight, we can win the future and the schools that we deserve.

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