



Resolutions To Action

LCWR Global Concerns Committee

Volume 30, Number 1

Winter 2021

Crises in Puerto Rico: US Policy and the Resilience of the People

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EXPERIENCE

Puerto Rico, like other Caribbean islands, is susceptible to natural disasters caused by hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods. What is unique to Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands is their relationship to the United States.

Puerto Rico is an unincorporated territory of the United States and US policy negatively impacts its economy, politics, and culture. An example of a negative federal statute is the "The Jones Act" of 1920. The law regulates commerce in US waters and between US ports and requires that all goods transported by water be carried on ships, constructed, owned, and crewed by citizens of the United States. It prevents foreign-flagged ships from carrying cargo between the mainland and certain noncontiguous parts of the United States, such as Puerto Rico.

A study done by the University of Puerto Rico found that the Jones

Act costs the island more than \$500 million annually. No nation can do business with Puerto Rico directly without using US transport. This increases the costs of goods and services and cripples the island's economy. Some US territories have been partially exempted from the antiquated, protectionist provisions of this law, but not Puerto Rico.

The island's citizens have been subjected to many other injustices perpetrated by the federal government without their consent. Prior to the Vietnam War, Agent Orange was used in El Yunque, Puerto Rico's national rainforest, without measuring its effects on the citizens of Puerto Rico. Puerto Ricans are denied the right to vote for president and their representative in Congress has limited voting privileges, even as Puerto Ricans faithfully serve in the military. The Puerto Rican island of Vieques, housed a US Naval base which for more than 60 years was used to practice invasions of other countries. It was also rented to other countries for military drills. Military personnel have been guilty of crimes, including

rape, against the local population. These things have been a source of pain and contention between the citizens of Puerto Rico and the federal government.

The 1952 constitution of Puerto Rico, ratified by Congress, expressly prohibits the death penalty, yet the federal government continues to impose it on citizens of Puerto Rico. They make every attempt to find the right case to undo the expressed will of the people. Each time the federal government tries to subvert the constitution of Puerto Rico the

Resolutions to Action is an occasional publication of the Global Concerns Committee of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). Members of the committee are: Susan Dunning, CSJ; Susan Francois, CSJP; Christine Garcia, SSND; Fran Gorsuch, CBS; Donna Marie Gribshaw, CDP; Patty Johnson, CSJ; Patricia Siemen, OP; Lucy Slinger, FSPA; and Ann Scholz, SSND, staff. Please address correspondence to:

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people protest outside the federal court.

The borders, passports, and visas are all granted and controlled by the United States. It is the federal government in Washington, DC which controls access to Puerto Rico. The island has no drug or gun industry but has become a haven for drugs, guns, and human trafficking under the supposed watchful eye of the federal government. Where is the protection afforded to the citizens of the island from the violence and insecurity that accompanies these criminal enterprises?

During the Clinton administration a number of tax breaks for companies operating in Puerto Rico ended. These tax advantages had formed the base of the Puerto Rican economy. Puerto Rico ended up with a \$70-billion-dollar deficit that sank the economy. During the Obama administration the federal government imposed a board of fiscal supervision which controlled the financial operations of the island. This board was not elected by the people, yet the people had to pay the board's outrageous salaries and benefits. Part of the board's plan to cut the debt was to decrease money for the University of Puerto Rico and cut the retirement plans for teachers. This so-called fiscal responsibility necessitated by previous mismanagement of funds failed to account for the impact of the decisions made by the Clinton Administration.

In 2017, Puerto Rico was devastated by two hurricanes, Irma and María. The people were without water, electricity, and communication for months. Roads were destroyed, bridges collapsed, homes damaged beyond repair, cars and belongings gone, people were isolated

and unable to communicate their desperate need. After that devastation, a series of earthquakes in 2019 wracked the country and continue to this day.

SOCIAL ANALYSIS

Puerto Ricans lack decision-making power as a territory of the United States. They have voice in Congress, but their lack of vote limits their ability to chart their own future.

The inability of the Puerto Rican people to control their own borders, especially in a time of pandemic, has allowed tourists to come to the island who do not respect the executive mandate to wear masks and has exacerbated the spread of COVID-19.

Government corruption, stockpiling water, food, and other supplies meant for the people after hurricane María so the First Lady could have a photo opportunity in the midst of a crisis caused justifiable anger.

President Trump humiliated the people of Puerto Rico by throwing paper towels at their overwhelming need, bragging that he could give Puerto Rico away to China, and lying about the number of deaths that occurred after hurricane Maria.

All of this, and an intercepted chat by Puerto Rican government officials making fun of the citizens of Puerto Rico, led the people of Puerto Rico to rise up and say: Enough.

REFLECTION

Soon after the hurricane the people of Puerto Rico reached out to one another recognizing

the local and federal governments were missing in action. They found ways to respond to the people's needs. The Puerto Ricans in the diaspora also collected much needed materials and food to help their brothers and sisters. Award-winning composer and lyricist, Lin-Manuel Miranda, wrote a song to raise desperately needed money.

In the summer of 2019, the people took to the streets, non-stop to protest the governor's treatment of them and demanding his resignation. On that day, beyond race, religion, politics, age, and gender the people were united. Ricky Martin, René Pérez, and others joined in solidarity to start a new chapter in the life of their people. Puerto Ricans were united and their message was clear. The old was out; a new chapter begun.

Bishop Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler, founder of the Sisters of Divine Providence, offers these words for our reflection. "It is the universal instinct for justice which gives rise to the concerns for justice in human society. The just society is an ideal that people dream of," and "God created nature to nourish all mankind [sic] and that goal must be accomplished."

ACTION

Please consider:
How are mainland citizens complicit in the injustice perpetrated on the people of Puerto Rico?

- What needs to change in the relationship between Puerto Rico and the federal government?
- What action are you called to take in order help realize "the just society" of which the people of Puerto Rico dream?