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Plundering of Puerto Rico continues as governor attacks public education

The pillaging and plundering of Puerto Rico reached new heights this week as Governor Ricardo Rosselló addressed the US territory Monday to formally announce his intention to dismantle and privatize the public education system on the island.

Rosselló's live televised announcement outlined a full-scale assault on teachers, students and the right to free quality public education. Included in his "broad education reform bill" is the introduction of charter schools, a voucher system, decentralizing the administrative system, massive school closures, and teacher layoffs.

Rosselló's announcement is only the most recent inflection point in a decades-long battle over public education on the island which has been greatly accelerated since Hurricane María. Despite significant resistance from the working class, youth and students, preparations for Rosselló's coming "education transformation" have steadily advanced over the last decade.

Privatizing Puerto Rico's public education system has been a long sought after goal of the local ruling class, going back as far as Rosselló's father in the 1990s. The Puerto Rico Supreme Court struck down a similar voucher program proposed by his father in 1994, saying the island's constitution prohibited using public money to fund privately run schools. How the new plan somehow circumvents this law has not been made clear. Given the steady decades-long decay of democratic forms of rule on the local and federal levels, and the institution of the Obama-era Financial Oversight Board, it can be assumed that the

ruling class will have no trouble removing all legal barriers that may prevent the plans from moving forward.

Using a strategy very similar to that employed against the island's electric company, PREPA, the ruling class has starved the public school system of resources and funding with the aim of driving it into a state of such disrepair that massive school closures and privatization efforts could appear justified.

This deliberate destruction of schools has had devastating consequences on an entire generation of youth in Puerto Rico. Between 2008 and 2012, Puerto Rican K-12 schools lost 45,000 students and 5,000 teachers. The dropout rate exploded over this period, with 60 percent of 10th graders failing to graduate high school. Between 2010 and 2015, 100 public schools were shut down.

When María hit the island in September it was seen by the local and federal ruling class, backed by various corporate and financial interests, as a golden opportunity to push through these long sought after plans. The education secretary, Julia Keleher, was calling New Orleans' school reform efforts a "point of reference" just one month after María made landfall, tweeting in October that Puerto Ricans "should not underestimate the damage or the opportunity to create new, better schools" and that the aftermath of María provides a "real opportunity to press the reset button." Keleher is an expert in such endeavors, having been involved through her firm Keleher and Associates in countless attacks on public education, including in the Detroit Education Achievement Authority.

In the months following the storm, hundreds of schools were deemed "unfit to reopen" without ever being visited by an inspector. Teachers, students and residents accused the department of education and the local government of using the claim of "hurricane damage" to close the schools previously targeted. To undermine this pretext for school closures, teachers, students and residents throughout the island have worked tirelessly to clean up debris and repair damage to their schools themselves. In a brave act of defiance, many have even reopened their schools and continue to operate without official authorization. However, the teachers' resistance has not yet been able to curb the onslaught of attacks.

Just weeks before the governor's announcement, Keleher made known her own plans to decentralize Puerto Rico's education department and introduce "autonomous schools." Across the board in the US the move towards "autonomy," or "local control," has meant bringing unions and local businessmen on board the national privatization program and providing them a lucrative niche in the billion-dollar education industry.

The governor reinforced this idea in Monday's speech, saying that the education reform promotes the creation of local educational agencies (LEAs), which are structures with fiscal and administrative autonomy. According to Rosselló, this will result in "reducing bureaucracy and increasing accountability."

In reality this means that whatever charter organization, non-profit or other education entity that controls the area will have virtually free rein over every aspect of how the schools are run. In New Orleans, LEAs were given control of school programming, curriculum, instruction, materials and texts, yearly school calendars and daily schedules, hiring and firing of personnel, employee performance management and evaluation, terms and conditions of employment, teacher or administrator certification, salaries and benefits, retirement, collective bargaining, budgeting, purchasing, procurement, and contracting for services other than capital repairs and facilities construction, all with little or no oversight.

Many of the criminals responsible for the destruction of public education across the US over the past two decades have their hand in the Puerto Rico crisis. Jeanne Allen, founder and CEO of the Center For Education Reform, who was a major player in the New Orleans "school reform" efforts, casually announced in November that charter operators across the country and "virtual education providers" should be thinking about how they can get involved in Puerto Rico's "post-Maria landscape." Keleher gave a glimpse into what type of organizations had been listening to Allen's November invitation when she announced after the governor's proposal that the new plan would allow universities or nonprofits like the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) to open campuses on the island.

The Knowledge is Power Program is notorious for its practices in inner-city districts. One study released by Western Michigan University in 2014 found that 15 percent of all KIPP students simply disappear from grading rolls each year, with over 40 percent of African-American students in grades 6-8 simply vanishing. After this "attrition" occurs, students are returned to so-called failing public schools, with KIPP pocketing the remaining per-pupil funds given by the government. Despite this revelation and many others, KIPP went on to win a grant from the Obama administration's Race to the Top program.

Within the litany of attacks laid out in Rosselló's Monday appearance, the most contemptuous was the attempt to bribe teachers' support with a pathetic \$1,500 annual salary bump. The money to pay this bribe would come from laying off hundreds of teachers and closing 300 schools. Teachers in the US territory make an average of \$27,000 a year and have not received a raise in 10 years.

The reality of Rosselló's agenda will be the ultimate elimination of elected school boards, no transparency in terms of how money is spent, no public meetings on how the schools should be run and, above all, that public funding will be transformed into private profit. The experience in Detroit, New Orleans and Philadelphia should stand as a stark warning to the working class of Puerto Rico as to what is in store if working class opposition is not mobilized against Rosselló's plan.