

Mass strikes and protests continue in Puerto Rico against debt deal

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On Wednesday, a coalition of unions and social movements called for new protests and strikes this Friday in San Juan. At issue are wages and pensions which are under attack by the Financial Oversight and Management Board. A month ago, federal courts gave the go-ahead to a settlement between Wall Street hedge funds and other holders of Puerto Rican bonds and the Pedro Pierluisi administration.

The settlement represents an attack on the Puerto Rican working class and is being challenged by workers across the island. The protests that followed the announcement of the debt deal have become massive. Last week thousands marched and rallied at San Juan's La Fortaleza government house.

This Friday's protest will very likely take the form of a general strike across the Island. Public workers will picket their places of employment early in the morning and then begin a series of marches that will unite them in mass rallies in San Juan and other cities.

"We demand a decent retirement and no privatizations," [of schools and public corporations] said Javier Córdoba, spokesperson for the Association of Puerto Rican University Professors.

In addition to the University Professors, also joining in this job action are members of the Puerto Rican Workers Union (SPT), the Union of Electric and Water Workers (UTIER), the Teachers Federation, the Central Workers Federation, the United Auto Workers (UAW), and other unions.

Migdalia Santiago, president of the EDUCAMOS teachers' group, declared on Thursday that there is a very real possibility of a general strike by all workers on Friday. It depends, in part, how the governor manages this "pressure cooker that is in his hands right now." Santiago suggests that there is some concession that the governor can make at the eleventh hour.

UTIER members walked off their jobs on Thursday evening in preparation for the action Friday.

On Wednesday, protesting highway construction and maintenance workers, also members of UTIER, had blocked access to the Highway Authority's headquarters in San Juan's business district [Santurce] demanding decent wages. Four protesters were arrested by the police for blocking the entrance to the building. The highway workers have been working without a contract since 2014. At a meeting last month with government officials the workers had been promised an answer on January 14. Instead, the Authority is now putting off a response until May 15, which the protesting workers consider a delaying tactic.

The four workers arrested for blocking the building have been charged with obstruction, according to a police report.

Notably absent in the above list of protesting organizations is the 40,000-member American Federation of Teachers-affiliated Puerto Rican Teachers Association (AMPR), whose leadership has ignored the strike movement. Instead, it negotiated with the Financial Oversight Board the pension givebacks that teachers are rejecting today.

In 2017, when AMPR became part of the American Federation of Teachers, AFT president Randi Weingarten issued a demagogic statement declaring that "An attack on teachers anywhere is an attack on teachers everywhere. AMPR has been battling against austerity and privatization in Puerto Rico and the everyday consequences for the Island's people. With this affiliation, the 1.6 million members of the AFT will join that fight." Now it is openly sabotaging the fight against the oversight board.

The danger facing workers is that the unions are attempting to divert this powerful movement against

the demands of the bankers into futile appeals to the Puerto Rican legislature, Governor Pierluisi and the federal courts. Such efforts are bound to fail, and only serve to wear down and demoralize workers. There is in fact, no local Puerto Rican solution to this debt crisis.

Workers must take control of Friday's protests and use them as a launching pad for the formation of rank-and-file committees independent of the unions, to join their struggle with those of workers across the US and around the world against the austerity policies of the ruling class.

Last year, the *World Socialist Web Site* initiated the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) in order to provide the framework for new, democratic and militant organizations of workers on an international scale. We urge all educators and workers seeking to fight for decent-paying jobs, a secure retirement and an end to the pandemic to get involved in this initiative and contact us about forming a committee today.



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