

Disaster Capitalism: Puerto Rico's experience with public education

Mercedes Martínez ¹

Translated by Wendy Santizo

When we speak of disaster capitalism in Puerto Rico, it applies to us directly since we have been a colony for over 500 years, first of Spain and later of the United States.

Today I want to share some historical context to better understand what we mean by disaster capitalism. In Puerto Rico, the struggle of educational communities has gone on for over 25 years against privatization policies by all colonial governments, which have attempted to privatize the public education system without success. In 1983, Ronald Reagan presented a report called "Nation at Risk" which stated that the public education

system was broken and new structural reforms that followed market principles were needed. It also laid the blame on public schools in order to discredit and dismantle them.

In spite of that, it would be ten years until the first attempt was made, in 1993, to privatize public education through a voucher system by which parents were given money from public funds to subsidize private schools. The teachers won the struggle against this model; we held a one day strike, brought forward a lawsuit and education vouchers were declared unconstitutional.

Over the following decades the Puerto Rico Teachers' Federation (FMPR) was the only representative of all teachers in the country, representing 45,000 members. Strikes are illegal in Puerto Rico, so having a presence

1. President of the Federation of Teachers of Puerto Rico - FMPR.



in the streets was a question of conscience because the government wanted to dismantle public education and hand it over to business. We were able to obtain a written stipulation by the Education Secretariat of the time which highlighted that no public school in the country could be privatized. That win was achieved thanks to the thousands of teachers who took to the streets for ten days.

In 2011, the former US Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, visited Puerto Rico to impose charter schools and tried once again to privatize but was not successful. Years went by and both political parties, which are very similar to the Republicans and Democrats in the US, favoured privatizing education to profit big companies and corporate interests and handing over the budget for the Education Department to these companies.

In 2015, authorities imposed a legislative bill that attempted to privatize and close hundreds of schools and teachers once again took to the streets and managed to stop the privatization. Then came the closure of schools. The colonial administration of Rafael Roman

tried to privatize and close 300 schools. We had already experienced the closure of 120 schools between 2014 and 2015 and although many schools closed, our struggle enabled us to save and recover half of them.

In 2017 Julia Keleher, who had no connection to this country, was named Education Secretary. She earned a salary of 250,000 dollars annually, and her first action in her new position was to announce the closure of an additional 305 schools. She is currently accused of corruption, but that year she managed to close 166 schools.

Also in 2017 Puerto Rico was ravaged by a category 5 hurricane which became the perfect moment for the privatizers to take advantage of the misery of the people. Authorities began to find ways to close hundreds of schools in a time of crisis. Schools suffered great damage, many were destroyed and others were flooded. At the time, Julia Keleher compared Puerto Rico to New Orleans and said it was time to have education reform. We knew that meant to privatize, close and hand schools over to the highest bidder. However, unionized

teachers dedicated themselves to repairing schools and making them ready to reopen and receive students; we also received a lot of international solidarity in order to reopen the schools.

While teachers repaired classrooms, authorities used New Orleans as the point of reference for moving ahead with the government's privatization agenda. 300,000 homes were lost, 75,000 permanently and the Education Secretariat saw that as the best time to privatize. Schools and communities resisted that plan and prevented many school closures. However, the reopening of schools was slow, and parents began to take their students out of public schools and into the private sector. In this context the FMPR turned to an act of civil disobedience which resulted in the arrest of 21 teachers for defending the right to public education. None of the charges were ever proved because the only crime committed was that of defending education as a human right of each child.

In 2018 we prevailed. We were able to reopen schools and presented an appeal before the education department tribunal. However in March, while the people were still recovering from the hurricane, for the first time in twenty years, the legislature passed a law that allowed for 10% of schools to be privatized. Nevertheless, the same day the privatization bill was announced, the teachers' union paralyzed the country and up to now only one school, one charter school of the 876 that exist in the country, has been closed. So they weren't able to carry out their privatization plan.

Then in January 2020, the country suffered an earthquake that brought down school buildings in the southern and other regions, and many children have not been able to return to class. Meanwhile, Covid19 has exacerbated the social inequalities which already existed because capitalism has forced us to live that way. Close to 60% of children had zero access to either the internet or a computer, and close to 30% of teachers also had no access; in the middle of the pandemic the government tried to privatize the public education system through online learning, although that project was repealed.

At this moment we are groups of teachers united from different unions and making proposals on how education needs to be implemented in the face of this pandemic and in the up-coming semester:

- Reducing the number of students to 10 or 12 per classroom to guarantee social distancing
- Reopening schools that were closed, which add up to 34%
- Computer equipment and internet be guaranteed as a human right for all the population
- All education workers and students be tested before even speaking about restarting face to face classes
- Health and safety protocols need to be established, and discussed with the teachers' union, as well as promoted to guarantee the well being of the educational community
- It's crucial that on a tropical island, where only 15% of what we consume originates from within the country, courses in agriculture and food sovereignty be implemented and further developed.

"There is no triumph without struggle, nor struggle without sacrifice"

Eugenio María de Hostos.

