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Speak Out Now

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Puerto Rico - The Power is in the Streets!

In the past two weeks the people of Puerto Rico have stood together against the corrupt government that has dominated their lives. In an island of 3.2 million people, 500,000 took to the streets. Workers waged a general strike shutting the island's economy down. In the face of this determination, Ricardo Rosselló, the precious untouchable governor and member of the political dynasty that ruled the island for years, was forced to step down.

While Rosselló was sending pictures back from a European cruise with his family, journalists were publicizing excerpts from a computer chat he had with government insiders. Those exchanges were full of racist, sexist and homophobic attacks on opponents of the regime. They mocked the deaths of the nearly 5000 people killed during Hurricane Maria nearly two years ago. They revealed the use of government funds and power to control the media and the channelling of tens of millions of dollars in government funds to their friends.

This level of corruption is nothing new. It has been a fact of life in Puerto Rico for the last 120 years (following 400 years of Spanish colonial rule). The U.S. exerted open military rule for two decades. After the resources and the people were under U.S. control a colonial administration was set up. In 1917 Puerto Ricans were granted U.S. citizenship, to be used to fight in WWI. Since then young Puerto Ricans have been pushed into the U.S. military.

This citizenship provides nothing, not even the right to vote for who was ruling from Washington D.C. In 1952, not wanting to be seen as a colonial power, the U.S. gave Puerto Rican people the right to elect their own legislature and governor. The U.S. Congress has the authority to override any decisions.

This relationship was really exposed following Hurricane Maria, when the governor and the Trump administration showed their attitude toward the people. Hundreds of thousands of people were

without shelter and the basics of life. The authorities claimed they couldn't get aid to the island. Trump threw rolls of paper towels to people who came to his press conference. In the two months following the hurricane 200,000 people fled to Florida. A year later many were still without shelter and electricity. The minimal aid that was sent to the island never reached the people, hidden by corrupt government officials.

Today Puerto Rico is \$72 billion in debt, mainly to U.S. banks. There is massive unemployment, 44% of the population lives below the poverty line. The revelation of the attitudes of those in power and the depth of the corruption in the computer chat sparked the protests by feminist groups. Their outrage expressed the outrage of the majority of the population and soon masses of people were in the streets demanding the resignation of Rosselló.

The demonstrations were met by the usual fierce repressive response of the police, but the people didn't back down.

Now, the proposal is for the current Secretary of Justice, Wanda Vázquez Garced, to be the interim governor. It is not clear that the people will accept this. Protests continue with some signs saying "*Wanda, don't get dressed because you're not going.*" We have seen a similar response recently in Algeria and Sudan with the heads of those governments pushed from power. And currently in Hong Kong, where there is a challenge to China's control of Hong Kong.

We can't predict how far these struggles will go, but there is an important lesson for us, especially facing the Trump regime and the endless election campaign. We are told that our political power lies in the ballot box. But, our real power, like the people of Puerto Rico, Sudan, Algeria and Hong Kong lies in the streets. And when workers use their power it points to the possibility of a different social order.