

was especially moved by the first-person accounts in the article and its detailed description of this earlier phase of the struggle. Although the bombing has ended, the people of Vieques still do not have control over much of their island, and the United States government continues to deny responsibility for the cancer epidemic and health problems it caused through its use of chemical weapons and large-scale pollution of the ecosystem.

Finally, Marisol LeBrón's 2016 article, "People Before Debt," addresses economic exploitation and the struggle for democracy and self-determination in Puerto Rico. It describes the class warfare being waged by U.S. hedge funds and vulture capitalists on poor and working people of Puerto Rico, as well as the process that led to Congress' passage of the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) and imposition of an undemocratic federal financial control board. This recent history reminds us that the radical pro-corporate, austerity regime that is currently being forced upon the Puerto Rican people under the guise of "recovery and rebuilding" efforts was well underway before Hurricane Maria hit the archipelago. It also reminds us that people were "taking to the streets to demand that the [Puerto Rican] government reject any further austerity measures at the behest of the *buitres* [vultures] circling the island." As LeBrón explains, people at the grassroots were able to organize across political divisions under the simple yet powerful idea that the needs of the people should come before the debt. The article is also prescient in its focus on the *Centro para el Desarrollo Político, Educativo y Cultural* (Center for Political, Educational, and Cultural Development, or CDPEC) and the network of *comedores sociales* ("solidarity kitchens") that have emerged as one of the most prominent and effective organizing initiatives in Puerto Rico in the wake of Hurricane Maria.

Although these and other articles capture some key moments in Puerto Rican history during the past half-century, NACLA should provide more consistent coverage on the situation and social struggles in Puerto Rico. In the past, NACLA has worked with important U.S.-based leftist organizations such as El Comité-MINP and the Puerto Rico Solidarity Commission to report on Puerto Rico—organizations that no longer exist. Future reporting should continue to include critical perspectives from the diaspora but also incorporate more voices from the Puerto Rican archipelago. NACLA can play a key role in the years and decades to come by serving as an outlet for news on Puerto Rican resistance to disaster capitalism and U.S. imperialism. ■

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MAISIE MCADOO

Vieques: Island Battle Zone

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Last February 6th, naval ships from West Germany, Canada, Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina and Holland converged on the small island of Vieques, ten miles off Puerto Rico's southeastern coast. The U.S. Navy had invited fleets from these NATO and South American countries to come to Vieques to participate in Operation Springboard—several days of war maneuvers to practice surface shooting, anti-submarine and aircraft fire, missile launching, and amphibious landings.

Operation Springboard never took place. The naval ships were met by a flotilla of 40 wooden fishing boats belonging to local fishermen who refused to leave the area. The small flotilla of 18 foot fishing boats remained in tense confrontation with the ships for eight hours. Finally, the naval ships backed down, turned around and returned to international waters. Led by the Vieques Fisherman's Association, the protestors had managed to halt, for the first time in 37 years, the bombardment of their island.

About 9,600 people live on the island of Vieques in an uneasy state of confrontation with the U.S. Navy. Only about 20 miles long and four miles at its widest point, Vieques is called Isla Nena (Baby Island) by its inhabitants. It is an island municipality of Puerto Rico (Isla Grande) and its citizens are Puerto Rican—that is, U.S. citizens. Vieques is known for its miles of white beaches, claimed to be some of the most beautiful in the Caribbean, for its phosphorescent bays and lagoons, and for rare species of fish and turtles that live in its coastal waters. But the island is also the site of one of the two largest U.S. military installations in Puerto Rico. As part of the Atlantic Fleet Weapons Range (headquartered at the Roosevelt Roads base on the island of Puerto Rico), Vieques is one of the U.S. military's most important training and weapons testing grounds in the world.

The Navy first moved to Vieques during World War II when Puerto Rico became a key area in the defense of the Caribbean and Panama Canal against German submarines. Puerto Rico has continued to be a strategic base for the U.S. in the Caribbean. In 1965, the U.S. used Puerto Rico as a launching area for the invasion of the Dominican Republic, it has been used in intelligence monitoring of neighboring socialist Cuba, and it would undoubtedly be used as a launching area for any U.S. invasion of Nicaragua.

The small island of Vieques has been particularly important to the Navy in the testing and evaluation of weapons and as a training ground—for the Atlantic Fleet forces. At one end of the island, the Navy keeps a massive munitions arsenal for use by the Atlantic Fleet in any future conflict involving Africa or Latin America. Vieques' use as a training and testing site has been greatly stepped up since 1975 when mass protests forced the Navy to withdraw from the neighboring island of Culebra. But with the protest movement gathering force in Vieques, there is a question about how much longer the Navy will have free rein on the island.

The Navy Versus the People

The U.S. Navy's disregard for the rights and well being of the residents of Vieques has a long history. When the Navy first arrived on the island in 1941, residents were given 24 hours to evacuate their homes, and were then moved by trucks to a narrow strip of land in the center of the island. As one islander recalls,

I was given \$30 for the house and there was nothing I could do about it except put everything we owned in the truck. I knew that those who protested were mistreated. When we arrived at Monte Santo, the relocation area, we found a sugar cane field. There were no houses or anything. Our first child was born the very next day—right there.

Today, 26,000 of the island's 33,000 acres are restricted by the Navy for military use. From 7:30 in the morning to 11 at night, six or seven days a week, naval ships and aircraft bombard the island and carry out underwater demolition.

These operations make life on Vieques like living in a battle zone. The constant noise makes it difficult for residents to go about their daily lives, creates a problem for teachers in conducting classes, and is the suspected cause of the high rate of emotional disturbances on the island. Dangers from the use of live ammunition is also

very real. Two young boys have been killed by explosions, and numerous people have been maimed by grenades. Like other Puerto Ricans, the people of Vieques have seen their traditional means of livelihood—agriculture and fishing—undermined by the U.S. presence on their island.

Extensive environmental damage, both on the island and in the surrounding waters, is one of the main reasons for the decline of fishing and agriculture. Fishermen, whose livelihood depends on these waters, find the ropes to their traps severed by naval craft. When the ropes are broken the nets descend to the bottom of the sea where for at least one year they serve as a death trap for all sea life. The fish, seeing food inside the traps, enter them, only to become trapped themselves. And so a chain is established by which dozens of hundreds of fish can meet their death in only one of those traps. Unexploded bombs litter the ocean floor. An anchor, striking one of these bombs, would detonate an explosion strong enough to kill everything for two or three miles around.

On the land, farmers find that their cattle and poultry produce less and less milk and eggs. Much of their grazing land is pockmarked with craters, dry and barren. The destruction of the island's vegetation by bombs has left the water table unprotected, and the Navy controls many of the areas where underground water could be tapped.

The Protest Grows

The Navy's continued presence on Vieques has become a major issue throughout Puerto Rico. After the Viequeses forced the cancellation of Operation Springboard in February, they followed up with a "Tournament of Dignity" on March 30, attended by fishermen not only from Vieques but from the main island as well. Their actions forced the cancellation of a second military maneuver, scheduled for May of this year. Operation Solid Shield, the biggest military operation in the Atlantic. From July 1-4, there was a three-day occupation of restricted Navy land by hundreds of Viequeses and their supporters.

Even the Governor of Puerto Rico has joined efforts to oust the Navy. Governor Carlos Romero Barcelo, a strong advocate of statehood who is generally very friendly toward the U.S., has brought suit in federal court to enjoin the Navy from continuing operations on Vieques.

The issue of Vieques cannot be separated from the broader question of Puerto Rico's relationship to the U.S.—a subject that is currently being hotly debated. The recent vote of the UN Decolonization Committee calling for the transfer of full authority and power over the island

to Puerto Ricans is only one more sign of the writing on the wall. Puerto Rico's status must change. What hangs in question is whether it will be drawn closer into the U.S. embrace as the 51st state, or whether Puerto Ricans will gain the right to self-determination and independence.

The Department of Defense is a formidable power in Puerto Rico. It owns more land, employs more people, and spends more money than all other federal agencies on the island combined. So, undeniably, the Navy is in a good bargaining position. If they leave, they take both jobs and capital with them. But weighing this prospect against the continuing bombardment of Vieques, many Puerto Ricans want the Navy out, and public sentiment has been significantly mobilized in this direction. This shift in popular sentiment and the possibility of a victory in the Vieques struggle is likely to have important repercussions for the broader debate over Puerto Rico's future status. **■**

MARISOL LEBRÓN

People Before Debt

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On April 6, 2016, Alejandro García Padilla, the governor of Puerto Rico, declared that the island's government was "insolvent" and thus signed an emergency bill that would allow him to stop payments on Puerto Rico's \$72 billion debt. The controversial bill was signed at a moment in which many Puerto Ricans, including local politicians and policymakers, found themselves increasingly at odds with the solutions proposed by U.S. legislators and foreign creditors. Noting that it was a drastic measure, García Padilla asserted that the *Ley de Moratoria de Emergencia y Rehabilitación Financiera de Puerto Rico* (Emergency Moratorium and Financial Rehabilitation Law of Puerto Rico), was one of the few tools left for the commonwealth government to keep Puerto Rico's "fiscal and humanitarian crisis" from deepening. As García Padilla put it: "For nine months we have asked all involved parties—our creditors, leaders in Congress, the Puerto Rican people—to sit at the table and participate in developing the solutions necessary to put Puerto Rico on the road to economic recovery. To date, only the Puerto Rican people and our leaders here on the island have intensified their participation."

The emergency bill was signed just days after a group of hedge funds sued the Government Development Bank, Puerto Rico's bond issuer, in an effort to prevent the government from using funds on essential services, which creditors argued should be used for upcoming debt payments. These investors, known as *buitres*, or vultures, purchased Puerto Rico's junk-rated bonds for pennies on the dollar and are hoping for a huge payday if they can force the government to keep making payments. The funds have therefore been putting increasing pressure on the Puerto Rican government to dramatically cut public spending and increase taxes.

A report released in July 2015 by Centennial Group International, policy and strategy consultants with strong ties to Wall Street as well as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, for instance, suggested that the commonwealth government lay off teachers, shutter public schools, and reduce funding to the University of Puerto Rico system in order to keep making debt payments. This suggestion came after the Puerto Rican government had already closed down or reconfigured hundreds of schools around the island over the past two years. Such moves by the island's creditors and their advisors confirmed for many that Wall Street expected the people of Puerto Rico to shoulder the burden of the debt with more taxes and a gutted public sector. In the face of these attacks, Puerto Ricans have been taking to the streets to demand that the government reject any further austerity measures at the behest of the *buitres* circling the island.

The emergency moratorium signed by Governor García Padilla also came approximately one week after Republican leaders on the U.S. House Natural Resources Committee circulated a draft of the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act, or PROMESA—which would install a Federal Control Board to oversee the island's finances. In some ways, the Republican plan proved just as problematic for Puerto Ricans as that of the hedge funds. The Federal Control Board proposed by House Republicans would consist of seven members appointed by the President, only one of whom must actually be a resident of the island. With virtually no local input, the Control Board would have the power to override the commonwealth government and implement austerity measures in an effort to reduce the debt. The proposed Federal Control Board seemed to signal the return of a more explicit form of American colonial rule to the island. Representatives Nydia Velázquez (D-NY) and José Serrano (D-NY) worried that the Board would

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