

Vultures of Disaster Capitalism

Comics Journalism
by Erik Thurman

In March 2017, a historic 72-day strike at the University of Puerto Rico was called after a bill was proposed to cut half of the budget of the university.

Students were demanding the resignation of governor, Ricardo Rossello...

and calling for an audit of the debt of the country, which many were claiming was illegal.

Criticisms were levied against the Fiscal Board—a collection of seven people appointed by the US Congress and who hold veto power over the Puerto Rican Governor and the local Congress—over austerity that had wrecked the island territory for over a decade.

And then Hurricane Maria hit.

In a flash, Puerto Rico was left completely devastated. Almost the entire population was left without electricity or running water for months.

Relief trickled in slowly, as response from FEMA and the US government proved lackluster.

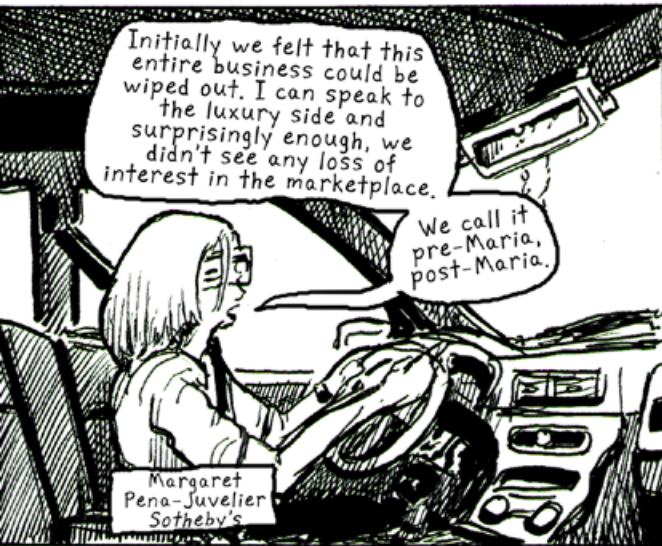
And in that shock, when governing norms were suspended, vulture capitalists aimed to reshape the island in a utopia for the rich and snap up public goods on the cheap and take advantage of an effective 4% corporate tax rate.



Initially we felt that this entire business could be wiped out. I can speak to the luxury side and surprisingly enough, we didn't see any loss of interest in the marketplace.

We call it pre-Maria, post-Maria.

Margaret Pena-Juvelier Sotheby's



Contracts were given out sleight-of-hand to various contractors with little oversight with aims to private entire public sectors.

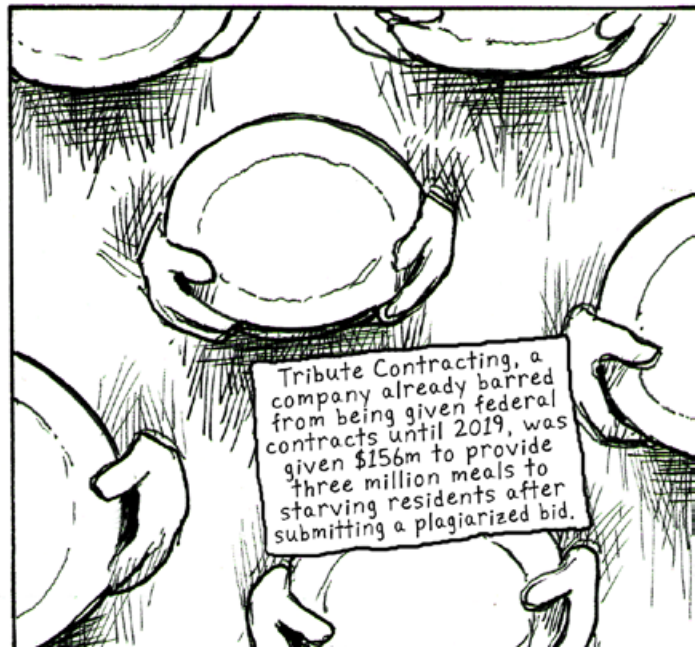
Small Montana firm Whitefish Energy Holdings, who had only two full-time employees the day Maria hit...



...gouged the government for \$300m and failed to provide 80% of the island with power after one month, before their contract was terminated.



Tribute Contracting, a company already barred from being given federal contracts until 2019, was given \$156m to provide three million meals to starving residents after submitting a plagiarized bid.





The company, which only had one employee to start with, delivered only 50,000 of the promised meals.



Little has been done to reign these contracts in. Government officials were making the process worse.



Carmen Yulin Cruz
Mayor of San Juan

You have a government passing legislation that says that employers can go to the courts to get an injunction before employees or unions go on strike or have a demonstration.

Forget about progressive. That's not a democratic agenda in the United States.



Discontinued electricity and running water has forced many citizens to flee to mainland US, as after six months, 40% of the island still lacks power.

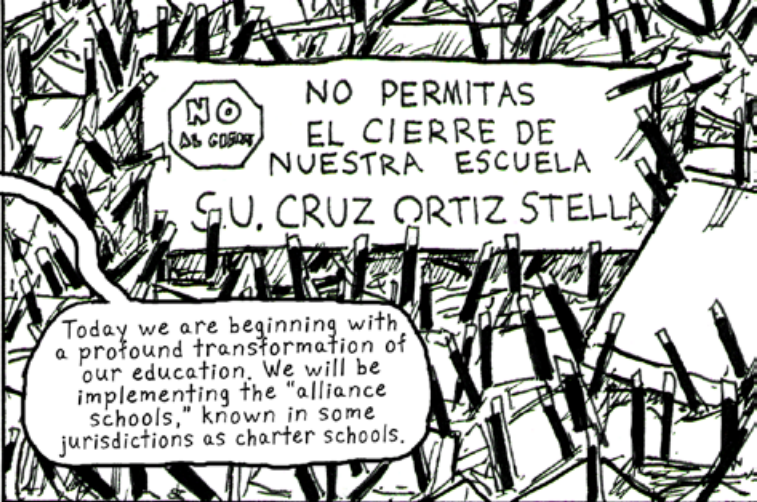


The PR governor has used the relocation efforts to justify further cuts into public infrastructure.



A few days ago, I announced a decision to transform our electric energy. The path to our transformation is not stopping.

Ricardo Rossello
Governor of Puerto Rico



NO PERMITAS EL CIERRE DE NUESTRA ESCUELA
S.U. CRUZ ORTIZ STELLA

Today we are beginning with a profound transformation of our education. We will be implementing the "alliance schools," known in some jurisdictions as charter schools.



Now, six months after the storms, PR's Secretary of Education is hard at work closing over 300 public schools while introducing a voucher system a la New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Over 340 schools have been closed in the past decade in PR.

We can see that [the fiscal board] is using depopulation as an austerity tool.

Naomi Klein
Author of The Shock Doctrine



As Puerto Ricans slowly regroup and activists begin to organize anew, it begs the question: who is Puerto Rico for?



Más de 4,600 personas murieron

Is it for the Puerto Ricans, or for rich investors and multinationals?