

Workers in Puerto Rico take to the streets

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Demonstrators from the public education sector march to Fortaleza street in San Juan, Puerto Rico
Protests in Puerto Rico are multiplying as government employees demand higher pay and improved pensions [File: Carlos Giusti/AP Photo]

San Juan, February 19 (RHC)-- Shrill whistles mixed with drums, tambourines and the clacking of spoons on pots as public employees shut down streets in Puerto Rico's capital Friday to demand better pay and pensions.

The crowd shimmied and clapped as demonstrators held up signs reading, "Fair wages now!" It's a call that has echoed across Puerto Rico in recent weeks as government employees and supporters take to the streets, emboldened by thousands of public school teachers who abandoned classrooms in early February to demand raises and better pensions.

Protests have multiplied and the unrest is posing one of the biggest challenges for Governor Pedro Pierluisi a year into his term. "The people kicked the U.S. military out of Vieques. They kicked out a governor. We can make this happen," said Abner Dumey, who teaches history in the northern town of Naranjito.

Legislators are the only public workers who have an automatic cost-of-living increase for their salaries. Most of the other public employees in Puerto Rico, which is a U.S. colony, have not gotten pay raises in more than a decade -- some of them for two decades -- as the cost of living has risen and the island has suffered a lengthy economic crisis and a government bankruptcy in the aftermath of deadly hurricanes, earthquakes and the coronavirus pandemic.

Power and water bills are nearly 60 percent higher in Puerto Rico than the U.S. average. Groceries are 18 percent more expensive than on the mainland, although healthcare and housing costs, among others, are lower, according to the island's Institute of Statistics.

Marcia Rivera, an economist and sociologist whose research focuses largely on poverty and inequality, said government workers are grappling with rising prices while getting the same salaries they had in 2008. "They're fed up," she said.

Many public employees work one or two additional jobs to make ends meet. Carlos Javier Vázquez, for one, is a paramedic in the mountain town of Barranquitas, and he also teaches emergency medicine and operates an ambulance company to help support his wife and four children. It's a life that is exhausting and not sustainable, he said. With paramedics in Puerto Rico earning a base salary of \$1,725 a month, he said he has no choice, noting: "It's extremely difficult to survive on that."

In an attempt to quell the demonstrations, the governor promised teachers a \$1,000 monthly increase just days after 70 percent of them walked out of their classrooms in protest earlier this month. He expanded the offer to school principals, regional superintendents and others just days later. Shortly afterward, he promised a \$500 monthly increase for firefighters and a 30 percent raise for paramedics.

Pierluisi's actions only fanned anger among other government employees, with some demanding their own pay increases as others fumed over the governor's recent comment that no one is forced to become a firefighter or police officer.

A problem is that all those increases promised by Pierluisi rely on federal funds that expire in upcoming years, and many people did not believe the governor when he promised to find local funds to make the increases permanent.

That promise also worried economists. Puerto Rican leaders are trying to restructure a \$70 billion public debt following decades of mismanagement, corruption and excessive borrowing that forced the government to declare the largest municipal bankruptcy in US history in 2017, just months before Hurricane Maria battered the island.

"It's highly irresponsible," said Antonio Fernós, a Puerto Rico economist and university professor who believes the government is unable to make the increases permanent. "It's Public Finance 101 of what not to do." Fernós said one of the key things that made the government go bankrupt was to use temporary

funding for fixed costs. “They certainly haven’t learned their lesson yet,” he said. “Puerto Rico is the poster child for government finances mismanagement. This is the worst timing for all wage earners.”

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