

What happened to America?

Randi Weingarten, President
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Bitá Mehrjou, a nurse from New York, recently joined a group of AFT members to provide relief to hurricane-ravaged Puerto Rico. She expected to see bacterial disease, post-traumatic shock, and untreated wounds and illnesses. But not a suicide note. Mehrjou and a team of nurses visited the home of an 80-year-old woman who was nearly out of food and water. Alone and desperate, the woman wrote what could have been her final words, contemplating ending her life. Fortunately, the relief team happened upon her in time, and a tragedy was averted.

But many tragedies are still unfolding in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Contrary to President Trump's boast that he should get 10 out of 10 for the recovery efforts in Puerto Rico, federal assistance to the American citizens there has been grossly inadequate. AFT members—who joined 300 union electricians, carpenters and other skilled workers to provide aid—tell us that many hurricane victims said the same thing: "You are the first person who has come to help." Devastation and suffering on this scale require more than volunteers and charity. The federal government is failing to meet its essential responsibility—the safety of its citizens.

Most residents of Puerto Rico are entering their second month without electricity, safe water or adequate food. I visited the territory last week and saw countless homes without roofs or even tarps; so, what was not destroyed in the hurricane is being ruined now. Animal carcasses, mudslides and toxins are polluting waterways; and residents with no option but to use unsafe water for bathing, cleaning and cooking are falling sick from dehydration, leptospirosis and bacterial diseases. People are dying from treatable conditions such as diabetes and kidney disease because they cannot access care. Morgues are overwhelmed.

The AFT volunteers marked a map of Puerto Rico to indicate where they had provided assistance, dotting the map from coast to coast. Another chart showed the six locations where they had seen Federal Emergency Management Agency representatives, mostly to accept applications for aid. I spent eight hours one day on the road from San Juan to the hard-hit regions of Guayama and Yabucoa. I did not see a single sign of federal response, save for one Army jeep. Yet Trump threatened to end aid to Puerto Rico before many residents have received any assistance for survival, much less rebuilding. Compare this with natural disasters in the continental U.S., where FEMA sometimes has a presence for years. Natural disasters happen indiscriminately, but the response to this crisis reeks of discrimination.

The aid package Congress approved is vital, but it is a drop in the bucket. American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) President Lee Saunders is right: Puerto Rico needs a Marshall Plan. It's easy to envision two scenarios—one in which the power grid is modernized, structures are

rebuilt, public schools and services are strengthened, and economic relief enables the island to thrive with tourism and industry. The other—to crush the territory with debt, expose citizens to the ravages of extreme weather, and hamper its ability to educate and care for residents—is unconscionable and un-American. Just as European countries devastated in World War II roared back even stronger after receiving targeted aid, so too would Puerto Rico.

Federal assistance to U.S. citizens in hurricane-ravaged Puerto Rico has been grossly inadequate.

Public schools play a central role in recovery efforts. Schools in Puerto Rico that initially served as shelters were turned into community centers and hubs for relief efforts. Members of our affiliate in Puerto Rico, the Asociación de Maestros de Puerto Rico (AMPR), are working with officials to inspect school buildings so they can be repaired, sanitized and reopened. They are starting to open for students Oct. 24. Yet, we know that school privatizers often prey on crisis, and there are warning signs that the commissioner of education in the Virgin Islands wants to abandon its public schools to the highest bidder.

Our union has been all-in. Thousands of AFT members have donated to our relief fund to help rebuild homes and restock schools. The AMPR has transformed its union hall into a relief center—on one floor, helping people fill out FEMA forms, and on another, packing food, water and other essentials the union then delivers to hard-hit areas. I was so moved to participate in these delivery caravans. And the AFT is launching Operation Agua (OperationAgua.com) with Operation Blessing

International, the Hispanic Federation, AFSCME and others to provide water-filtration devices to homes, schools and relief centers throughout Puerto Rico.

That's who we are as a union movement. We care about people, and we fight for what's right. We fight to help people have the freedom to secure a better life, and we work to alleviate human suffering. Like Bitá Mehrjou, who, when she saw the hurricane's devastation, asked: "How can I help?" It is deeply shameful that President Trump is not asking the same question.



Brett Sherman

Weingarten, second from right, at the Asociación de Maestros de Puerto Rico relief distribution site in Yabucoa, Oct. 14.

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