

We Are No Longer Scared: Non-Tenure Track Faculty at the University of Puerto Rico

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The situation at the University of Puerto Rico is framed within a context of a 10-year economic depression and unsustainable debt crisis, which was meant to be remedied by the 2016 Puerto Rico Oversight Management Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), signed by President Obama, and its federal Fiscal Control Board (*Junta de Control Fiscal*, the word *Junta* in Spanish is politically charged). Similar to what was presented at the conference this weekend regarding Greece, South Africa and Mexico, the public university became, throughout the second half of the twentieth century, a vehicle by which many people have escaped poverty.

This week marks 100 years since second-class citizenship was imposed upon Puerto Ricans by the United States. Today Puerto Rico continues to be a non-incorporated territory, that is, a colony, and its residents have neither voice nor vote in U.S. Congress. The Fiscal Control Board has exposed and exacerbated the colonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico, as it has the power to veto local government actions. In addition, the recent elections not only brought Trump to power but also in Puerto Rico put in power a conservative and neoliberal minority government that favors annexation. This new Puerto Rican government has expressed its willingness to cooperate with the colonial Junta, comprised of the very same people who have direct economic interests in debt servicing and the neoliberal measures to be taken. The people of Puerto Rico pay \$3 million dollar monthly for Junta operations. Just like in the old days of structural adjustment programs, cuts are expected in public services like health, education and culture, while energy and water prices skyrocket.

This week, the government suggested that the University of Puerto Rico should take a \$1 billion budget cut within 3 years, that is \$333 million per year (more than a quarter of our budget), raise tuition by 30%, reduce health benefits by 23% and pension benefits by 40%, in addition to increasing tenure track course load to 15 credits per semester (it is now at 12 credits). The suggested plan actually seems ridiculous because 7 out of the 11 campuses can be closed or privatized and there would still not be enough money to sustain university operations, only the School of Medicine would be able to sustain itself.

Doing the math makes it clear that non-tenure track professors, who are now the majority—just over 50% of academic staff across the university system and at some campuses 60% of uni professors are adjunct—will suffer the most.

The situation is especially threatening for full time non-tenure track faculty. I think it is important to talk straight about salaries and leave behind our academic, petit-bourgeois pretentiousness. A full

time non-tenure track professor earns \$4,000 per month to teach 12 credits, and a part timer can teach a maximum of 9 credits to earn \$1,200 per month. That is, three quarters of the work for one quarter of the salary. I and many of my colleagues are looking at a 75% salary slash. For those of you not familiar with living costs in Puerto Rico, food can be more expensive than in New York City.

My personal contingency plan is this. I have a not-so-elegant two-bedroom apartment in San Juan. I rent one bedroom via AirBnB, as non-tenure track professors do not get paid for the months of June and July. I will most likely start doing AirBnB regularly and by next year, if I choose to stay home in Puerto Rico, will depend on AirBnB as an irregular but main source of income. Those who cannot bare earning the poverty wages or are not fit to drive from campus to campus on a daily basis have the option of either working in sectors other than education or emigrating to the United States.

While antagonistic forces in Puerto Rico launched a media campaign to defame University of Puerto Rico, criticizing university professors for their exuberant salaries during a time of crisis, hereby supporting the idea that the public university system should be dismantled, the precariousness of non-tenure track faculty continue to be invisible.

The Puerto Rican Association of University Professors (APPU, by its acronym in Spanish), is a bona fide labor organization, but without representative status for the purpose of exclusive collective negotiation, that groups together tenure-and non-tenure track faculty members alike. Traditionally, non-tenure track professors are underrepresented in the governing structures of APPU. Yet APPU has spearheaded campaigns in favor of non-tenure track faculty rights. Successful efforts include reaching an agreement for a basic health care plan for full time staff in 2008. However, the work and living conditions of full- and part-time non-tenured staff continue to be invisible.

Previously, non-tenured staff were often unwilling to play a leadership role in APPU due to their vulnerability and fear for administrative reprisal. Upon APPU announcing a two day strike, a national march to the San Juan Capitol building and the governor's mansion in conjunction with the students, non-tenure track staff decided to organize themselves autonomously and create the Adjunct Faculty Action Committee (CADSP) for the following purposes:

- 1) To make publicly visible the precarious conditions under which non-tenure track faculty live and work.
- 2) To take direct actions against any cuts until the debt can be transparently audited.
- 3) To advance the rights and working conditions of non-tenure track staff, demanding more tenure track hiring from among non-tenure track staff.

Participants in this committee have expressed their interest in taking the initiative to lead the defense of their rights and public higher education, now that non-tenure track professors constitute the majority. The attitude is: we are looking at job losses and in many cases at a 75% cut in salary. We have nothing else to lose and we are no longer scared. This is not a dress rehearsal. We shall defend our public university!

I would like to share with you an extract of a poem written by my colleague at UPR Mayaguez, Beatriz Llenín Figueroa.

From "*This is not a Paper*":

It is possible to make poetry with numbers. I have been informed: the matter amounts to roughly 75% within the "university in ruins." Poetry is also made with words. This is a tautology, but it must be declared, since the market takes words over... as well. For example, "excellence," "quality,"

“success,” “innovation.”

The excellent quality that an innovative education promises for the success of young people is the reverse of the 75%, referred to as,

—what a beautiful name!—

“precarious labor.”

Right... surely, that is not poetry, not by a long shot, but in the hands of poets

-which are not mine- every word has potential.

This is not a paper.

Nor is it keywords. Or networking. Or convention of the profession. Or swelling CVs for inexistent tenure track positions. Or knowledge one “works on.” Or sprinkling fashionable names here and there. Or, for that matter, transforming any names in fashionable ones. Or saying nothing in 5,000 words. Or writing with a leftist timbre exclusively for readers with a leftist timbre who, with lots of luck, will read you and then congratulate you for your leftist timbre, and all of this happening in a journal with a leftist timbre, whose internet hits are increased by means of unfathomable databases that auto-control themselves, or so it seems, while conveniently leaving behind loads of money. And the money is not for you, of course.

Nor is this a parade of hypocritical smiles, with or without hors d’oeuvres, where intimacy, an encounter, thought, vulnerability will never find shelter.

What it is, perhaps, is a matter of life and death.

This is not a paper.

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