

Speech at TransformDenmark International Conference 2022

Paul Figueroa:

Climate emergency in Puerto Rico – as a result of United States colonialism

Good afternoon everyone, my name is Paul Figueroa from the Puerto Rican Independence Party, I am honored by the invitation of the Transform Denmark Conference, and feel privileged not only to share this space with you today with comrades from different movements and countries, but for the lengths you went through to accommodate me and bring me from the other end of the world.

I am also excited to share in a space that recognizes the need for the representation of stateless nations - if you do not have a seat at the table you are being eaten, and unfortunately that is the case of my nation. With no voting representation in the United States Congress and denied entry into the UN since we are not a sovereign nation, Puerto Rico is completely disenfranchised from international politics and has no agency to contribute to global decisions on climate policy - which is indeed a troubling position to be in when you are a small island nation facing a world climate crisis. So as I address myself to you all today, I speak to you all as someone who comes from a nation in danger of becoming extinct. If austerity, privatization, and apartheid do not wipe us out, climate change most certainly will. My hope today is that in our own small way, we can work to overcome the democratic deficit my nation faces amid this great threat.

Puerto Rico has experienced first hand the severity of the climate crisis. In September 2017, we experienced two category five hurricanes, Hurricanes Irma and Maria within less than two weeks of each other which provoked nearly 5,000 deaths and created over 500,000 climate refugees in an island-nation that's only 160 by 56 kilometers. For every centimeter the sea level rises we lose one meter

of coastline, in Puerto Rico we are already seeing the erasure of coastal ecosystems, the disappearance of beaches, and entire communities being wiped away and forced to relocate due to coastal erosion and rising sea levels. Inconsistent and disproportionate rain patterns are increasing the frequency of floods, landslides, and drought. Since 2015 the Puerto Rican government has on multiple occasions needed to impose water rations because there's simply not enough. Climate change has not only affected every single Puerto Rican, but has traumatized us and been ingrained into our consciousness. As a personal anecdote, aside from my activism, I am a teacher. Last year I asked 76 middle school students of mine between the ages of 13 and 14 to write an essay about what they believe is the most troubling issue of our time. Out of the 76, 74 chose climate change. In Puerto Rico there's an often repeated thought that the destruction Hurricane Maria left behind was also symbolic in that when we could finally leave our homes after two days of wind and rain, all that was left was bare wood and concrete covered by paint and vegetation for all of us to see. In the same way, it also left behind the crude realities of unbridled capitalism exacerbated by our colonial condition. In the nearly five years following Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rico has experienced a series of environmental crises, all of them magnified by capitalism, and exploited by the vulture capitalists who have taken advantage of our colonial condition, since our own government does not have the sovereignty to make definitive policy to combat the climate crisis.

Perhaps the most devastating example of the intersections of colonialism, capitalism, and climate in Puerto Rico is the ongoing situation in our island municipalities of Vieques and Culebra. Vieques and Culebra are small inhabited island towns off the coast of the big island of Puerto Rico, that for decades were occupied by United States military bases. In the case of Vieques, more than two thirds of the small island of only 135 square kilometers was occupied by the United States Military for the purpose of both aquatic and land bomb testing, and firing ranges. The native viequenses were either displaced and sent to other

islands such as Saint Croix, or corralled into communities in the island's center, meaning they were surrounded on both sides by the military. The United States Navy was forced to abandon their base in Vieques, due to the years of peaceful resistance by viequenses and the leadership of the Puerto Rican Independence Party, where many of the party's leaders became political prisoners for occupying land on the military bases. However, while the military left behind their bases, they also left behind an extremely fragile ecosystem in Vieques, and the after effects of pollution caused by their weapons which nearly twenty years after their departure are still very present in viequenses' lives.

Aside from the negative effect of constant bombing and firing drills for more than six decades on Vieques on the ecosystem, Vieques also faces a public health crisis. Studies by the University of Puerto Rico's Graduate School of Public Health have found that viequenses are eight times more likely to die of cardiovascular disease and seven times more likely to die of diabetes than in the municipalities of the big island. Vieques also has the highest cancer rate in all of Puerto Rico. As an explanation for the health crisis in Vieques, independent scientists and researchers have found that there is a dangerous level of toxic heavy metals in the island. However, the federal agency that deals with toxic substance pollution, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, claims to have found no causal links between toxic substances and increased sickness and disease in Vieques, and therefore refuses to assign funds to the depollution of Vieques.

While Vieques is the archipelago's sickest municipality, Vieques has no hospital. The hospital was destroyed by Hurricane Maria, and five years later, its reconstruction is being held up by federal disaster funds that have been assigned to Vieques but yet to be disbursed. If a viequense needs medical attention they need to take a ferry to the big island, however the ferry system has been privatized, and the cost of the ferry has increased by 700% since Hurricane Maria. These conditions make it impossible for native viequenses to stay in the

island, however the outmigration of viequenses deprived of essential services has made the island an opportune place for foreign investment, turning Vieques into a playground for developers and venture capitalists in the hospitality and luxury yacht industries, who have bought up large sections of land in Vieques. Naturally it is in the interest of the United States government to mitigate the damage they've caused in the island, and it is in the interest of the vulture capitalist and elite classes who exercise unfathomable amounts of influence and control over the colonial government to exploit the situation for their own gain. Vieques is a micro-level example of the macro-level colonial political project occurring in Puerto Rico which seeks to make the islands uninhabitable for Puerto Ricans.

The issue of displacement is one that is common and gaining increased significance in Puerto Rico across the entire archipelago. The displacement of Puerto Ricans is caused by a blend of local and federal laws that have converted Puerto Rico into a fiscal paradise, attracting foreign investors, venture capitalists, and elites to Puerto Rico. Here again, we see the glaring intersections between capitalism, colonialism, and the climate crisis.

On December 22, 2017 when many Puerto Ricans were celebrating the holidays in the dark after Hurricane Maria's onslaught, Donald Trump signed into law the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 which created Opportunity Zones designated by the Department of Housing and Development which aims to incentive investment in distressed communities by establishing tax havens there. Due in no small part to the concerns of housing rights and community activists concerned about the implications the zones would have for gentrification, in the states only 25% of a state's jurisdiction can be declared an Opportunity Zone. Puerto Rico was granted an exception and 98% of its jurisdiction is an Opportunity Zone for American investors. A 2020 report by the Center for American Progress states that the law "will not produce equitable or sustainable development for distressed communities" and calls the program "government-

sanctioned gentrification driven by the capital gains of America's wealthiest investors". The Puerto Rican Department of Economic Development and Commerce however claims the law "opens up an immense world of opportunities to boost the growth of the country's economy" and even offers potential Opportunity Zone recipients access to the government's properties inventory to industrial and commercial lots as well as raw land at the end of their welcome presentation.

The 2017 Tax Law is in addition to the local laws Acts 20/22 where foreign investors, 93% of whom are from the United States, pay only a 1-4% annual income tax, 90% property tax exemption, an 60% exemption from patents and municipal taxes, and a 100% tax exemption on passive income. While Acts 20/22 were passed in 2012, before Hurricane Maria only 1,332 individuals were granted decrees for the law, in the four years since the hurricane that number has more than tripled, and Act 20/22 recipients have bought more than \$1.2 billion of property across the island. Both the Federal Tax Cuts and Jobs Act and the local Acts 20/22 paved the way for the collective capital of more than three million Puerto Ricans to fall in the hands of just a few thousand American investors. In Puerto Rico, gentrification is not just state-sanctioned but openly and willfully promoted. Here hurricane survivors are not just victimized by climate displacement but are additionally burdened by direct and cultural displacement as well.

The increased attraction of foreign investors to Puerto Rico has also aggravated our negative climate impact as they continue to be a barrier to common sense climate legislation. As I stated previously, Puerto Rico is experiencing rapid coastal erosion. However, the Act 20/22 and Opportunity Zone investors are among the principal antagonists against the approval of a new coastal protection law and a moratorium on coastal construction in maritime zones. For the tax-evading investor class, they have no issue with coastal erosion. They are only required to live in Puerto Rico six months out of the year

and the rest of the year can rent the home on platforms such as Airbnb. A recent investigative journalism study found that in coastal communities across Puerto Rico, in some places as many as one-quarter of residential properties are Airbnbs. The elites can take out insurance policies and take other protective measures on their beach properties, and assure a return on their investment for their supplementary vacation home. If they lose their home to a natural disaster or coastal erosion, they can get their money back and buy a new one. I, a Puerto Rican, living a mile away from the coast, if I lose my home, I will lose everything, and it will be in no small part because of the capitalist elites who are blocking common sense legislation to adapt to the climate.

In 2016 the United States government approved the PROMESA Law, which instated a non-elected seven person fiscal control board that has ultimate authority over all Puerto Rico's finances and has imposed five years of austerity policies that have limited our government's resources to respond to climate emergencies, as evidence by the chaotic and deadly response to the 2017 Hurricanes.

In June 2021, Puerto Rico's nationalized energy authority, PREPA was privatized - the privatization of our grid was linked to \$18 billion in disaster recovery funds allocated in the last US administration, and PREPA was sold to the American corporation LUMA Energy. LUMA has no interest in pursuing renewable energy and has lobbied the government to create a Sun Tax that would penalize citizens that go green and off their grid, and increase our dependence on fossil fuels both in the short and long term. The company now controls 100% of our electric grid and 50% of our water resources. Furthermore, aside from LUMA's environmental negligence, the courts have found that LUMA has not fulfilled the requirements of its contract, yet refused to issue an order of arrest against its directive. Once again - the interests of a private company supersede the interests of the people - due to the power vacuum created by our democratic deficit.

LUMA's insistence on increasing Puerto Rico's dependence on fossil fuels is largely the fault of another American energy company called Applied Energy Systems, AES that is responsible for a large percentage of the island's energy generation. AES has fomented our dependence on coal from the State of West Virginia and deposits toxic coal ash in the towns of Penuelas and Salinas, where the citizens of those towns face higher birth defects and cancer rates than anywhere else in our nation. In 2016 when the PIP's Senate Leader, and Puerto Rico's senior senator Maria de Lourdes Santiago joined a citizen occupation against the ash landfills, she was arrested. In a sovereign country, the arrest of an elder stateswoman for defending her constituent's interest over that of a private foreign company against public interest would raise red flags internationally - outside of Puerto Rico it barely made it into the news. In 2017, two US Congressmembers from West Virginia that serve on the Committee of Natural Resources actively lobbied our local government to continue allowing AES' harmful practices. Despite AES's influence in the colonial government and their ability to monopolize the use of fossil fuels in perpetuity in Puerto Rico, the company has somehow lost money on their investment in Puerto Rico, and is asking the local government for a \$20 million fiscal bailout. What AES is asking the Puerto Rican people is to pay a foreign company to kill us and destroy our environment, so that the rich elite, who will never have to live in the precarious conditions they create, can make good on their bad investment. Again, in a stateless nation, a foreign company could use their politicians to supersede the laws and interests of that nation on their own land.

President Biden while at COP26 spoke of the moral imperative of creating an environment that raises the global standard of living. He also shared the outline of the US long-term climate goals and the need for a generational investment in our environmental resilience and in our workers and our communities throughout the world. However, the Biden administration failed to agree to end the coal trade and phase out oil and natural gas. The Biden

administration also failed to come up with a plan for the financing of climate adaptation measures for vulnerable countries. Ironically, all of the present day United States colonies: Puerto Rico, Guam, Virgin Islands, and Samoa, are all island nations, and all can be qualified as vulnerable countries. The issue is that for us smaller island nations that fall within the US jurisdiction the United States has not proven itself to be a reliable partner when it comes to climate policy and for us nations that are so vulnerable to the climate crisis,

Concurrently, The United States has also shown some openness to Puerto Rico's self-determination, a historic opening which has not been seen for decades. Again, I accept the president's sincerity. I do believe an inclusive and just self-determination process is a major first step in solving our democratic deficit and granting us the agency and space to develop climate policy that truly represents the reality of Puerto Ricans. However, I fail to see how a self-determination process for Puerto Rico can have any legitimacy when our natural resources are all owned by US companies, especially when they have shown no interest in serving the people or addressing climate change. A true decolonization process means empowering and enabling Puerto Ricans to retake control of our land, resources, policy, and economy. So, assuming the good faith of the president and his government - I would say that if they want to aggressively pursue bold climate change policy that must include the equally aggressive pursuit of it's island nation's rights to self-determination and independence to fully integrate our nations into the global front against the climate crisis.

The Puerto Rican Independence Party has for decades been the island's boldest leader when it comes to climate policy. The party proposes the adoption of a National Plan to Combat Climate Change, we propose a 25% reduction of greenhouse gases over the next for years, the banning of gas pipelines, the creation of a Department of Environmental Protection, a Department of Post-Consumption Resources, a Public Corporation of Rural Composting, a 0

Garbage Law incentivizing recycling and composting which we project would create over 40,000 green jobs and contribute \$437 million to our economy, we also propose the reappropriation of more than 700,000 acres of land for eco-farming thus reducing our carbon footprint. We propose an updated coastal protection law and a moratorium on coastal construction, the creation of a community consultation process to make sure that citizens are empowered, aware, and engaged in any projects that will have some sort of environmental impact, and finally the nationalization of our energy grid to initiate the transition to green and renewable energy. Our proposals are not just the product of policy wonks, but are the product of a grassroots movement of Puerto Ricans who believe in eco-friendly agricultural sovereignty, solar and renewable energy, the protection of our coastal habitats, and who believe our islands should be proactive in the fight against climate change. The problem is however, that despite our proposed legislation and a grassroots popular movement behind it, our lack of sovereignty puts extreme limitations on what we can and cannot do in regards to implementing climate policy. And to return to the analogy of the table - when citizens are not seated at the table it often means that vulture capitalists and their corporations have taken their chair. Now more than ever it is imperative to reverse the policies of austerity and privatization the United States has enforced on us, return these resources and services to the people, and facilitate a meaningful and equitable process of self-determination and independence.

When I spoke similarly of this situation in Scotland a few months ago, many well intended comrades in the audience came up to me afterwards and shared their indignation over our colonial condition, as well as sadness and empathy over the great hurdles my nation faces. While I appreciate the kind words and compassion of my European comrades, as leftists we must be called beyond compassion into action.

A good friend challenges a friend when they are wrong. European leftists whose nations are allied with the United States bear a significant responsibility as

anti-imperialists and anti-capitalists to condemn the United States for perpetuating colonialism in Puerto Rico. My universal challenge to all of you here today in the spaces you represent is to present and approve resolutions in favor of Puerto Rican self-determination and independence, and denouncing the climate emergency on the island. We make sure that your local governments and the United States government are aware that the European people condemn these actions.

Puerto Ricans want to implement solutions to climate change, we want to integrate ourselves into these global conversations to address the climate crisis, and most importantly we want to live. Given the urgency I feel for myself and my nation, I implore action, and ask for your solidarity. Thank you for your time. Viva Puerto Rico Libre.