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WhyHunger

Solidarity, Education and Action!

Comedores Sociales: An Emerging
Movement in Puerto Rico

By:

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Cultural Development (CDPEC)

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(Comedores Sociales de Puerto Rico)

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Note from the editors:

Before Hurricanes Irma and Maria struck in 2017, a large percentage of Puerto Ricans faced food insecurity on a daily basis. In fact, Puerto Ricans were 4 times more likely to be hungry than the average American. In a region with rich soil, a temperate climate and a rich agricultural history, these figures become even starker when set against the reality that more than 85% of food consumed by Puerto Ricans is produced off the archipelago. After the back-to-back Hurricanes in 2017, the rate of food insecurity jumped to 85% of the total population and food aid was delayed by an anachronistic law known as the Jones Act, which stipulates that all the shipping between U.S. ports be conducted with American-made ships staffed by American crews. Add to that the ongoing debt crisis and you have the perfect lens for understanding the persistence of high rates of poverty and food insecurity in Puerto Rico. Even before these category 4 Hurricanes struck with a one-two punch, *Comedores Sociales* had emerged as a response to student hunger on college campuses in Puerto Rico within the context of new austerity measures that further impoverished an already very low-income population. After the Hurricanes, *Comedores Sociales* began organizing *Centros de Apoyo Mutuo*, or Mutual Aid Centers, that have continued as a form of communities feeding each other – not only with food, but with knowledge, culture and visions of a sovereign state.

In this *Food Justice Voices* article, Giovanni Roberto, a social activist and organizer for the Center for Political, Educational and Cultural Development (CDPEC) and the Community Kitchens Project of Puerto Rico (*Comedores Sociales de Puerto Rico*), tells the story of the emergence of student-to-student, community-to-community feeding centers – a personal and political story of need, ingenuity and resistance.



By Giovanni Roberto

I am one of the people that works at *Comedores Sociales de Puerto Rico* (*Community Kitchens of Puerto Rico*), the social project where I cook, help with organizational tasks, and promote political activism.

Comedores Sociales is the name that comes from the donation-based food stands that we started in 2013 at the University of Puerto Rico Río Piedras campus and other locations throughout Puerto Rico. However, *Comedores Sociales* is about more than just food. We offer a critique of the capitalist system and search for transformative experiences for social change rooted in the personal experiences of each of the people integrated into the project.

Paola Aponte, one of the organizers and leaders of *Comedores Sociales*, often explains that *Comedores Sociales* emerged for "individual and collective reasons." In my case, food and hunger have always been an issue. For many years my family had to resort to SNAP [formerly called food stamps] which, as we know, helps but is not enough to sustain a family's food needs. In order to have some cash income we sold *gandules*, *ajíes*, *calabazas*, mangos and anything that grew and we could harvest in the nearby mountainside. My mom would make *pasteles*, or sweets, among other things to sell.

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My dad worked sporadically until his back was permanently injured and his employment options were even more limited. At our home, unemployment and self-employment were the norms.

It is from this type of personal struggle – mine and others – that *Comedores Sociales* emerged as a model of sustainable mutual aid for feeding people. A diversity of centers oriented toward satisfying social needs have been started in Puerto Rico over the last years, even before Hurricane Maria.

The work done to increase self-esteem, transmit confidence, and project hope can't be underestimated in Puerto Rico because, without a doubt, we are a country whose collective psyche has been pounded on by colonialism. Generating experiences of change from our social projects has the potential to help us overcome the fear historically sowed in us generation after generation about our survival and our political future.



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Political and collective solidarity

My political awakening occurred alongside the historic events of the late nineties such as the strike [Huelga del Pueblo of 1998](#) when workers protested the privatization of the telephone company; [the release in 1999 of Puerto Rican political prisoners](#) sentenced to jail in the early 1980's for their resistance to colonialism, and the intense [struggle to reclaim Vieques](#) from the U.S. Naval Base. These were *historic* events rooted in the collective experience of the Puerto Rican people, and I experienced them within my *individual* context of being from the mountains, being hungry and living in poverty.

For me, these are the roots of how I became forever convinced of the need to construct another social, political and economic system that would be different from capitalism and all of its extractive ways. In Puerto Rico, global capitalism manifests itself through the direct control the U.S. exercises over Puerto Ricans. We suffer from colonial-capitalism, and this is why our struggle for a better life is always *independentista* and *anticolonial*.

The first food distribution tables that I set up were meant to accompany the political work I was doing with the [International Socialist Organization](#) (OSI), an organization defending the idea that an organized working class can and should run society. The act of "organizing" was what most interested me as an activist. To my surprise, in less than a year, the food tables became the political work itself. It also presented me with a dimension of purpose in life that I hadn't yet integrated: the struggle against hunger and scarcity. The first tables that I organized and ran together with my mother sold a meal for \$4, or provided a meal based on whatever you could pay or in exchange for whatever you could help with.

I started to set up food tables at the University of Puerto Rico Cayey (UPR Cayey), and even though initially the idea of setting up food

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tables was mine, it wouldn't be long before the OSI chapter in Cayey would realize that it was a political act in line with their purpose. Tensions quickly generated and those opposing us at the university made it clear just how radical our actions of feeding people were. The authorities of UPR Cayey tried to stop us various times without success at the request of the manager of Faza Food Service, the private administrators of the university cafeteria. Afterwards that same manager along with the supervisor of campus security contacted Milton Vega, a municipal authority, who personally came to counsel us on the matter. It was a case of a private enterprise in partnership with the State up against a food stand that gave away maybe 20 meals per week to students that could barely offer a minimal monetary donation. Within a short time after Mr. Vega visited us, I received a personal fine from the local authorities which our accountant was thankfully able to get removed. On another occasion the campus security proceeded to unsuccessfully try to stop us from giving out meals.

Every censure from the administrators of the UPR strengthened our food tables, and therefore our protest, and gave us political experience. This is how we took on the name of *Comedores Sociales* and we explained the project's objectives in writing to the UPR authorities: we are feeding people in solidarity as we build a nonprofit organization dedicated to constructing long-term experiences of change for people.⁽¹⁾ When we were questioned about the legitimacy of our ▶

⁽¹⁾ See annex

"business", we responded that it is in line with the model of nonprofits: we accept donations, in kind materials and volunteer labor as solidarity donations. And in cases where the person cannot provide any of these, we provide them with food anyway.

One Thursday, by order of the UPR Cayey's Dean of Administration Belma Borrás, the campus security blocked the food tables with their bodies. Now it was the State practicing a *peaceful protest* against a civilian student initiative. The security guards, the majority of whom appeared to be embarrassed, just stood there as a way to stop the distribution of the solidarity meals. The administration alleged that we did not respect the exclusivity of the private consortium that managed the university's food service. The scene caught the attention of many students who came up close enough to reach for the food in between the guards' bodies. After a while the campus

clergy at that time, Mario Medina, ordered the guards to leave.

It is important to underscore that we organize *Comedores* around solidarity, not a charity handout. This is why we have established flexible donation methods including receiving a meal for free if necessary. This allows us to avoid paternalism in our relationships with those who organize with us, volunteer or donate to us, and eat with us. We are in effect meal providers but with the objective to build community. Any additional funds we receive pay for rent and other operational expenses including personnel that work on the projects.

We at ISO undertook the construction of *Comedores Sociales* as part of our political work at the same time we organized the [Centro para el Desarrollo Político, Educativo y Cultural, Inc.](#), a nonprofit that we created in 2012 to organize sustainable solidarity projects to "help us build another Puerto Rico."





Growth in the crisis

The past years have been particularly difficult for political movements in Puerto Rico that look to improve people's living conditions. Framed by the debt crisis and more than 10 years of a painful recession, the upper class is waging a head-on war with the working class in Puerto Rico. The principal effects are obvious: the destruction of public service, the increase and consolidation of unemployment, and a massive migration. No one seems to be able to escape the effects of this ongoing crisis.

Sadly, our *Comedores Sociales* is receiving a lot of people seeking food because hunger grows parallel to economic and financial crises. A person who came to eat told me that he comes to the *comedor* for lunch, goes to the Christian⁽²⁾ soup kitchen in the late afternoon for dinner and asks his neighbor for food every now and then to survive the week. Someone else who recently visited the *Comedores* said this about the university students: "They are going hungry very often. You go to their fridge in the

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dorms and there is absolutely nothing there." This is more common than one would think.

This explains why more *comedores sociales* are opening around the island independent of our organizing efforts. In October 2015, for instance, we learned that one opened at the UPR Ponce campus with the initiative and support of the student council. They spent weeks collecting food and promoting the food table in offices and inside classrooms around the campus. This committed group served over 300 meals every Thursday during the semester. The organizing committee has been able to include the majority of the campus student groups in this initiative, with whom they share the responsibility of preparing and distributing the meals. In addition, they made "the food table" a mandatory responsibility of the student government body, turning the *comedor* into something permanent.

Sometime later Stephanie Fontáñez, a social work student and President of the *Asociación Universitaria de Estudiantes de Trabajo Social* at UPR Humacao (UPRH), gave me a call. She wanted to start a *comedor social* but she wanted to know how it operated. On December 3, 2015, the last day on the semester calendar, UPRH had their first *comedor social* and since then they have served over 100 meals per week.

Also, in December of 2015 we held the first meeting for all of the *comedores sociales* we had learned about. Students from Cayey, Humacao, Mayaguez, Ponce and Río Piedras gathered together in order to get to know and learn from each other. Though our models and processes varied, we all shared a common understanding that the work was not about charity, but about building solidarity among the people of Puerto Rico. We are currently planning a similar *encuentro* among the various *comedores sociales* in 2019.

⁽²⁾ In reference to Proyecto Mesón de Amor, Meal distribution based initiative organized by Casa de Amor, Fe y Esperanza, Inc. (C.A.F.E) with ties to the Methodist Church of Río Piedras Zone.

Meanwhile it just keeps growing. Far from the public eye but with great efficiency, a group of students organized a *comedor social* at the Universidad de Sagrado Corazón a few years ago. They work under the umbrella of the University Pastoral office and serve over 50 meals per day from Monday through Thursday. Just like the other universities that have *comedores sociales*, they want to start a garden on campus. In mid-April of 2016, students at the UPR Arcibo campus started a *comedor social*. And in 2017 just when UPR Mayaguez was ready to start theirs, Hurricane Maria struck.

The student strike of 2017: Comi, Comi

In 2017, the students of UPRRP went on strike for 72 days in protest of extreme austerity measures that included a significant increase in tuition. To strengthen their political actions, the students resorted to diverse forms of organizing including self-management of basic needs during the occupation of the university: food, cleaning, and security, among other things. One of the most important committees of the strike was the food/meals committee in which Joshua Garcia Aponte, member of *Comedores Sociales* and CDPEC, participated.

Joshua, an early participant of our food tables, came up with the idea of a Central Food Committee, or the *Comite Central de Comida*. He wrote up a proposal and he presented it at the meetings, explaining and defending it, and becoming one of the principal organizers. This committee later became known popularly as *Comi, Comi*. For the duration of the strike he cooked, organized the distribution of the meals, and recruited students with various abilities from the different Departments. Some said that if *Comi, Comi* had not existed to provide food for the strikers, they wouldn't have been able to participate in the strike.

The strike continued and made progress. Near the end the *Comi, Comi* consolidated its



resources to acquire a shipping container and tried an innovative political move: a permanent occupation on campus with the objective of establishing a *comedor social* managed by students after the strike was over. The night before the strike was over, university administrators paid a private security company to remove the container. The private security company applied excessive force, intimidation and illegal arrests to finally remove the container located near the *Huerto Semilla*⁽³⁾ (Seed Garden), another grassroots project on campus.

The group decided to continue "container or no container," said Joshua about the period in which the group continued to provide the meal service on campus post-strike without a permanent location. During the final weeks of the semester, the *Comite Central de Comida* provided a "*comedor universitario*," which cooked up meals in peoples' homes and garages who were experiencing a great deal of hardship.

That's why it made sense to both initiatives to fuse into one project now called the *Comedor Social Universitario* (CSU) in which a larger and autonomous group of students manage everything done on the UPR Río Piedras campus. This has allowed for the initial group to invest time in other social initiatives that are part of the vision of *Comedores Sociales*.

⁽³⁾ Huerto Semilla is an ecological and agricultural project founded in 2010 at the UPR Río Piedras campus.

Mutual Aid after Hurricane Maria

We created the *Centro de Apoyo Mutuo* (centers of mutual aid or CAM) together with the social and economic development collective for the town of Caguas called Urbe A Pie⁽⁴⁾ and an army of volunteers that joined in quickly from the start. We used the model of three different types of donations to invite people to, as we often say, "not only receive a meal but to construct something long-term." Since we have experienced what Naomi Klein calls "[disaster capitalism](#)" and which she defines as "the rapid-fire corporate re-engineering of societies still reeling from shock" after a natural disaster, we wanted our initiative to have the least governmental intervention as possible.

The back-to-back hurricanes of Irma and then Maria in 2017 made the government's negligence clear—the well-being of the general population wasn't the priority of the government, but the system perpetuating the accumulation of corporate wealth surely was. Even with the ports containing ships loaded with gasoline and merchandise, the government limited its distribution. During the first weeks, hundreds of truckers offered to work for free with no success. And instead of reestablishing national electric power rapidly, the government waited and handed out [shady contracts for hundreds](#)

[of millions of dollars to a small company in the states called Whitefish Energy Holdings. Our government hid details about the number of deaths](#) as a consequence of the natural disasters Irma and Maria. While people were dying due to lack of medical attention, our politicians were fighting for assignments of loans, contracts and political positions.

The idea of "*centro de apoyo mutuo*" was embraced by different sectors in Puerto Rico that established similar centers in various towns. This is how the *Comedores Sociales de Puerto Rico* found itself involved in initiating other social community kitchens, like the one in Yabucoa with the support of CDPEC and the committed work of Kique, William and Vladimir,⁽⁵⁾ and the *Centro de Apoyo de Las Carolinas*, a community in Caguas that has provided meals and other services to its residents since 2017.

To strengthen relationships among each of the *Centros de Apoyo* and other similar initiatives, we created a network called the *Red de Apoyo Mutuo*, which continues to do very interesting grassroots work.

⁽⁴⁾ Urbe A Pie is a collective that works for the social and economic development of the traditional town area of Caguas. They have a variety of and projects such as: Huerto Feliz, Boutique Comunitaria, Galería de Arte Comunitario, and Café Teatro El Reflejo.

⁽⁵⁾ See article [Escuchar la política necesaria at CDPEC Blog](#) www.cdpecpr.org/blog



An Emerging Political Movement

The *Comedores Sociales* is emerging in Puerto Rico as a political movement geared towards satisfying basic needs and it's growing to become a model for many other sectors. There is the *Centro de Estudio Transdisciplinario para la Agroecología*, or C.E.T.A, in Lares and the theatrical initiative of a home-based workshop *Colectivo Columpio* in the town of Camuy. There is also the *Consejo Integral Comunitario de la Barriada Morales* which empowers and assists the residents of the community. These initiatives have the potential to spread because they respond to basic needs and are very easily replicated. As political projects they are challenging unjust systems in the same vein as social projects like the Black Panthers⁽⁶⁾ and the Young Lords⁽⁷⁾ did in the past in the USA. These emerging political projects in Puerto Rico, similar to *Comedores Sociales*, are sustained by their own resources, private donations or literally the passing of a hat. Instead of depending on the local or federal government, or even corporations, these initiatives "depend" on their own people – those who also benefit from them.

"With [Puerto Rican] independence we will die of hunger" is what some people think and say,

"Instead of depending on the local or federal government, or even corporations, these initiatives 'depend' on their own people – those who also benefit from them."

but with colonial capitalism, it can be argued, we are dying now. An anti-establishment political movement has to be developed—one whose objective is to organize with the people at the base to concretize alternatives to the crisis. We need to fight against the old world and construct a new world.

We don't have to ask what one's political status is or what ideology one adheres to because the *comedor* itself is a *filter*. If the person isn't in solidarity with our tactics and purpose, if they don't want the best for others, it's more than likely that we don't know each other. If they don't believe that people organizing themselves can make changes, it's likely they won't trust our new projects. Because we are not operating under the existing authorities, they might not consider us legitimate.

Profound change takes time. This is why I have faith in future struggles. The generation of change is a generation of movements to transform political functions. This is how our projects are simultaneously nourished by the crisis and are radicalized as a result of the crisis.

The movement that we need to put into action as a project of national liberation will be enriched by combining political struggles with concrete alternatives for the world we want to live in. We are doing it. We have to keep sowing.

⁽⁶⁾ The *Black Panther Party* was a black nationalist, socialist and revolutionary organization in the United States from 1966 to 1982. Its militants were involved in "survival programs" that served breakfast to children, gave clothes in the winter, and kept watch in the barrios for white police.

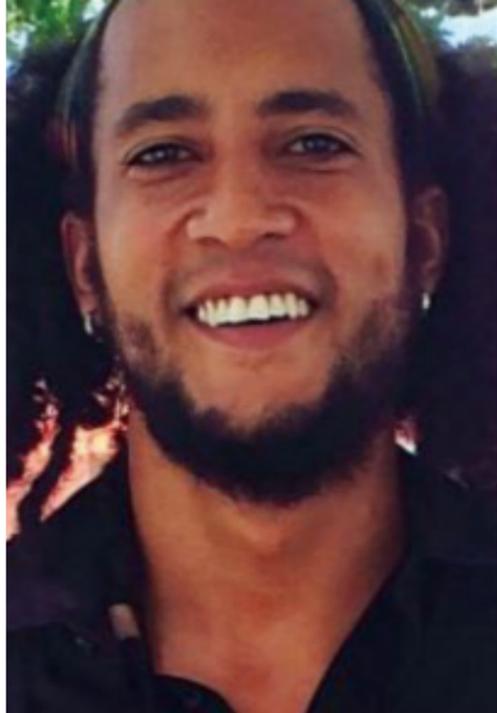
⁽⁷⁾ The *Young Lords Party* was an independence and revolutionary organization of Puerto Ricans in the United States during the sixties and seventies. Like the *Panthers*, the *Young Lords* organized programs that met the necessities of food, meals, and other types of care in their communities.



Giovanni Roberto

Giovanni Roberto is a social activist and organizer for the Center for Political, Educational and Cultural Development (CDPEC) and the Community Kitchens Project of Puerto Rico (*Comedores Sociales de Puerto Rico*). Roberto was a student leader during the 2010-2011 mobilizations and strikes on university campuses in Puerto Rico. By organizing solidarity food distribution since 2013, *Comedores Sociales*, has been a pioneer for the new resistance to austerity measures put in place by governmental authorities. Notably *Comedores* are sustained by the community who contribute their work, their money or materials to the collective project of feeding each other. CDPEC was instrumental in organizing Mutual Aid Centers (*Centros de Apoyo Mutuo - CAM*) after Hurricane Maria to distribute food and attend to other immediate needs, at the same time building power among community members through political education. CAMs are now working to become permanent spaces for communities to eat, learn and organize. ■■■

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WhyHunger brings its unique assets and history to building a broad-based social movement to end hunger. Our set of core values rests on the understanding that solutions and innovation are often found in the grassroots. WhyHunger's programs work to support these community-based organizations as they grow and develop, and bring new ideas and practices to creating a just food system that provides universal access to nutritious and affordable food.

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—Paola Aponte

an organizers and leader of *Comedores Sociales*



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