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Puerto Rico Protests Against Rising Electricity Costs Amid Persistent Power Failures"

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Safety cones blocking an exit at the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority are moved by a driver in Palo Seco, Toa Baja, Puerto Rico, on Oct. 19, 2017

Puerto Ricans turned out in the hundreds last Wednesday, protesting a proposed hike in electricity bills many residents complain are already sky high, without commensurate service from energy provider Luma to justify the cost.

The territory has been struggling to rebuild its power distribution system after Hurricane Maria completely destroyed the island's electricity grid in 2017. Since then, brownouts and blackouts have been common across the island, especially during time of high winds and heavy rains – the exact conditions produced by a tropical wave across the Caribbean last week which produced

outages across Puerto Rico on the same day as the march.

Protesters marched to the governor's mansion, holding up territorial flags and flashcards articulating their fears that another increase in electricity bills would make life unlivable for Puerto Ricans already struggling to survive. Demonstrators came from a wide cross-section of society and included teachers, professionals, and religious leaders, all joined in united opposition to the plan.

In February, a [proposal](#) put before a federal bankruptcy judge outlined a plan to restructure the debt of the territory's failed power utility PREPA (the Electric Power Company), which would result in the introduction of a connection fee ranging from \$13 to \$1,800 monthly for different classes of customers. Aside from the additional fees, protesters claim that the current 25 cent per kilowatt hour residential rate could almost double over the next 30 years.

The judge has delayed approval of the restructuring plan and held a hearing on the issue while marchers were demonstrating.

"Not everyone has money to install a solar system," said Reverend Lizzette Gabriel, bishop of Puerto Rico's Methodist church, noting that over 40 percent of Puerto Ricans live below the federal poverty rate. "The higher the energy costs, the less money a family has to survive."

Apart from putting the crunch on families, Rev. Gabriel is concerned that higher commercial rates for electricity consumption may force the closure of small businesses unable to earn enough revenue to support the increased expenditure. She also argued that churches like her own may need to lower costs by performing fewer services if the price of electricity climbs any further.

Puerto Ricans are generally angry over the decades-long accumulation of over \$70 billion in debt by corrupt and incompetent politicians, and particularly angry at being asked to shoulder the cost of that mismanagement. The \$10 billion in debt owed by PREPA, the largest of any one state agency, is the only one that has yet to be restructured.

Despite the anger from residents, however, chair of Puerto Rico's Financial Oversight and Management Board David Skeel said that the proposal currently before the bankruptcy judge is the least painful out of all the options that have previously been discussed. Meanwhile, the company's creditors, or at least several major representative factions of creditors, have signaled their approval of the deal.

Governor Pedro Pierluisi, while agreeing that PREPA should bear the cost of its debt restructuring, had in January reassured the public that privatization of the territory's power generation and distribution systems would not result in [skyrocketing prices](#). Pierluisi made that vow to a skeptical public while announcing Genera PR, a subsidiary of New Fortress Energy, would take over the operation of PREPA's power generation assets.