

After the storm: a New Jersey town struggles to recover

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On April 26, nearly two weeks after a brutal spring storm hit New Jersey, President Bush declared six counties—Bergen, Burlington, Essex, Passaic, Somerset and Union—federal disaster areas. Acting Governor Richard J. Codey estimated that New Jersey sustained \$180 million in damage from the rain on April 15 and 16 that left 40,000 people without power and forced 3,000 people from their homes. The governor wants to see the entire state declared a disaster area. More counties may be added as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) completes damage surveys.

The northeaster swept the Eastern Seaboard from South Carolina to Maine, leaving 18 dead in its wake.

One New Jersey Town, Bound Brook, was particularly hard hit. Flood walls, levees and a water pumping station installed by the Army Corps of Engineers—part of a still incomplete flood control project that has lasted for decades—failed to hold back the water. The result: five feet or more of flooding.

“The pumps didn’t work,” Michael Picone told the World Socialist Web Site on May 3 as he was performing flood repairs on a 20-unit apartment complex he owns on Bound Brook’s East 2nd Street. “They were installed to take the overflow from the storm sewers and put it back into the river—that was the theory, anyway. But all they pumped was air. Someone told me there was a news story on CNN that said Jeb Bush was affiliated with the company that made the pumps. I wouldn’t doubt it. You can’t trust those guys.”

East 2nd Street suffered dramatically. Nearly every house on the block—most of them World War I era two-family homes—had windows marked by the fire department with large spray-painted X’s, indicating that the house had been checked and families removed

to safety during the flood.

“They were taking people out of here in row boats,” Picone said, looking out at a street littered with clumps of wet sheet rock, remnants of walls torn from the flooded homes. He continued, “People put a false faith in the [Army Corps of Engineer’s] flood project. After Floyd they took out loans and rebuilt their businesses and homes. They were resilient. Now they’re more numb than resilient. It feels like there’s a diminishing future for the whole town.”

Hurricane Floyd hit the state as a tropical storm in 1999, killing six people. Three of them who drowned in Bound Brook, when record rainfall sent 12 feet of water down Main Street.

Many of the over one thousand Bound Brook residents who were forced to stay in temporary shelters due to last month’s flooding were immigrant workers from Costa Rica.

“They tend to live in illegal basement apartments,” Father Ed Murphy, of the St. Paul Episcopal Church told the WSWs. “You know, it’s not uncommon in this town—you have a two family house, the owner lives on the first floor, the mother-in-law lives up on the second floor and you have a family of laborers living in the basement. So when the basement gets flooded, they end up in shelters.”

The church is a temporary housing facility for FEMA, its meeting room full of blue-jacketed FEMA employees and state police troopers. A Sunday school classroom has been turned into a temporary nursery for children. The nursery provides a playroom for kids whose parents come to brave the lengthy, mind-numbing task of presenting their disaster case to FEMA. “All they need is to have one member of the family—even their baby—with a valid Social Security number and they’re eligible for help,” Murphy said.

“But, still, a lot of folks are afraid.”

“These people are a part of this community,” he said. “They’re beautiful, young, hardworking. But the floods disrupt their lives. It’s very stressful”

He showed the WSWs another Sunday school classroom with a now ironic mural of Noah’s Ark on the wall. The room held provisions donated by the community to help the temporarily homeless. “We’ve got instant coffee, pasta, pampers—I’m still trying to get somebody to donate a pallet more of these,” he laughed, picking up a bag of the disposable diapers. “Pampers are like gold.”

Just over a block away, the Bound Brook Presbyterian Church housed about half of the remaining homeless families. “As of this afternoon,” Head Pastor, Lou Kilgore told the WSWs, “the other half are being brought here. So this will be the one remaining shelter. We’ll have about 120 people. The problem is that this storm knocked out about two hundred housing units so these folks are going to have a tough time finding a place to live until apartments become available again.”

When the WSWs asked him why people didn’t move elsewhere, he answered, “It’s not that easy—this is their community. Most of these people are Costa Rican. In fact, I can tell you the town they come from in Costa Rica—San Isidro. There’s work in Bound Brook for them. They know if they brave the journey up here there’ll be a community of people they trust. It’s their community as much as ours and they don’t want to leave it—they shouldn’t have to. But where can they go?”

“FEMA,” he continued, “I don’t know, they’re slow in providing immediate help and people are scared to go to them. The Red Cross, on the other hand, will hand you a check for one month’s rent and the security deposit—no questions asked, no strings attached—as long as you can show them a letter, signed by a landlord. But right now there’s nothing available. So you have people walking around with a guaranteed month’s rent and deposit, plus the deposit check given to them from their last apartment, but nowhere to live.”

The plight of residents of this one New Jersey town weeks after a severe storm is irrefutable testimony to the inadequate and patchwork character of the government’s response to disasters. While the administration in Washington has had no difficulty spending over \$500 billion so far on the war in Iraq and

continuously invokes “homeland security” as its principal concern, it fails miserably in providing for and is largely indifferent toward the security of people like those in Bound Brook, who are confronting real crises resulting from the ravages of nature

And Bound Brook is no exception. It is in a sense a reproduction in miniature of the devastation—and devastating societal and governmental failure—seen in New Orleans in 2005.

Working people in Bound Brook are highly suspicious of the Bush administration, though the failure to provide protection from the recurrent flooding of the Raritan River is the fault as well of Democratic and Republican administrations that preceded it.

“We are skeptical,” Sheridan Fitzpatrick of Bound Brook told the *Newark Star Ledger* on April 29, the Day FEMA arrived. “I’ve been homeless for over two weeks. They should have been here pronto.”

“There’s a lot more anger this time than with Floyd,” Bound Brook councilman Jim Lefkowitz told the *Ledger*. “After Floyd people were encouraged to come back and fix things up because the government was going to help alleviate the flooding. Now, seven years later, here we are again.”

A strong sense of community remains in Bound Brook, despite widespread bitterness towards the failure of the federal government to provide adequate relief. The WSWs talked to Maurice, one of the Costa Rican workers who was fortunate enough to be able to move back into his apartment with his wife and children a few days after the flooding subsided. He was doing light construction work in the same church that housed him for those stressful days. Asked if he ever considered moving, he replied, “Yes, I am going to move as soon as I can afford it.” To another town? “No, no,” he said “To a part of this town that doesn’t flood.”



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