

# The Minnesota bridge collapse: One more indictment of the profit system

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The collapse of the most highly traveled highway bridge in the state of Minnesota has once again revealed some ugly truths about American society. Occurring during the run-up to the second anniversary of the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe, the bridge disaster has once more left people in the United States and around the world wondering in shock and horror how it is possible that the richest nation in the world enters the twenty-first century with a social infrastructure that is thoroughly decayed.

As of this writing, five people have been confirmed dead from Wednesday's collapse of the Interstate 35W highway bridge that traverses the Mississippi River near the center of Minneapolis, a major American metropolis. An unknown number of other victims remain trapped in vehicles that plummeted 60 feet into the swirling currents of the Mississippi, and at least 70 were injured.

Like Katrina, there were ample warnings. Numerous surveys concluded that the bridge was "structurally deficient." Its steel deck truss design, which provides no margin of safety should any major component fail, was discarded for precisely that reason shortly after the bridge was constructed forty years ago.

There are 756 such bridges in the US, and a total of 77,000, 27 percent of the nation's spans, that have been designated "structurally deficient."

Media news anchors, commentators and editorialists have noted that the Minnesota bridge disaster is a symptom of a neglected and rotting infrastructure. Many have pointed to the 2005 report card on America's infrastructure issued by the American Society of Civil Engineers, which gave the country a "D" and warned of dire consequences unless a crash program were undertaken to fix the problem. Bridges actually fared comparatively well in the engineers' report, with a grade of "C." The country's aviation system, dams, drinking water, electric power grid and hazardous waste system were deemed even worse, and given a "D."

But the media reaction to the engineers' conclusion that it will cost \$1.6 trillion over five years to repair the infrastructure is to present such a sum as impossibly high. There is no such questioning of the estimated \$450 billion already spent on the war in Iraq or the ongoing weekly outlay of \$1.8 billion, not to mention the \$533 billion Pentagon budget or the \$555 billion in tax cuts for the rich enacted by the Bush administration and Congress in 2001.

What is not broached, let alone discussed, is why the nation's material and social foundation has been brought to such a state. That is not surprising, because the answers constitute a devastating indictment of the American political and corporate ruling elite and

the profit system which they uphold.

Whatever the specific cause of the Minnesota bridge disaster, the underlying reason is the indifference, incompetence and negligence of the government, and the fact that the US is a capitalist society, in which the accumulation of vast personal wealth by a small percentage of the population is deemed more important than the welfare of the people as a whole.

The decay of the material underpinnings of American society has gone hand in hand with a relentless assault on social welfare programs and the jobs and living standards of the working population. It is the product of nearly three decades of uninterrupted social and political reaction.

This has involved a sharp reduction in the federal government's role in maintaining the nation's infrastructure. As the *Wall Street Journal* noted on Friday, "In the 1960s, the federal government and the states paid roughly equal amounts to fund infrastructure projects, but state and local governments bear most of the costs these days, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank. 'The commitment of the federal government has been sharply reduced,' said Felix Rohatyn, a former Wall Street banker and CSIS trustee..."

The ruling elite has been engaged in a systematic drive to dismantle the very limited elements of social infrastructure and a social safety net left over from the New Deal programs of the 1930s. These were implemented under Franklin Roosevelt in the face of the greatest social and economic crisis of the twentieth century, which included not only the financial collapse known as the Great Depression, but also the environmental disaster that produced the Dust Bowl across the Great Plains. The New Deal established regulatory agencies that placed certain legal restrictions on big business and created public works such as the Tennessee Valley Authority, which built dams and levees to curb flooding and provide electrical power.

Despite the howls of protest from Roosevelt's opponents within the ruling elite, these were not socialist measures; rather, they were reforms instituted to forestall a social revolution from below that would threaten the profit system as a whole.

From the 1970s on, as the crisis of American capitalism deepened, the US ruling elite has repudiated the entire concept of social reform and dismantled, under the banner of "deregulation," the previously enacted restrictions on corporate activities. The result has been a nonstop plundering of society that has produced an unprecedented concentration of wealth at the apex of society

and a level of social inequality greater than in the days of the Robber Barons at the beginning of the last century. Fraud, the worst forms of speculation and outright criminality have become pervasive in the upper echelons of American society.

The president, George W. Bush, personifies the incompetence, stupidity and inhumanity that characterize so much of America's money-crazed corporate elite. On Thursday, Bush spoke of the bridge collapse, saying, "We in the federal government must respond and respond robustly to help the people there not only recover, but to make sure that lifeline of activity, that bridge, gets rebuilt as quickly as possible."

Who could not but be repulsed by these empty phrases, two years after Bush promised to rebuild New Orleans and then turned the "reconstruction" into a profit bonanza for unscrupulous corporate cronies, with the result that the worst-hit poor and working class sections of the city remain abandoned and derelict, and tens of thousands of families permanently displaced?

The American political system is dominated by a drive to destroy all barriers to the accumulation of the personal wealth of a financial oligarchy. Taxes are virtually nonexistent on the principle sources of income of the super-rich, such as capital gains and other forms of speculation. No matter how dire the state of the population—health care, education, pensions, housing—and how decrepit the physical infrastructure, it is virtually taboo to even propose increasing taxes on the rich in order to address social problems.

And it is not just the selfish greed of the rich that is responsible for the decay of the social infrastructure. The mass character of modern society, its international interconnectedness and its complexity stand in violent contradiction to the inherently unplanned and anarchic character of capitalism. The rational and humane development of the material and social environment is incompatible with a system in which each capitalist is engaged in a bitter struggle to obtain the largest possible share of the profits generated by the exploitation of human labor.

Hundreds of millions of people in the US rely on complex social systems to provide the essentials of life: food, water, electricity, transportation, health care, education. The failure of these systems reduces the population to conditions of barbarism, as was seen on a mass scale in the Gulf Coast two years ago.

Working people perform the labor that keeps these systems going, but they have no say in their operation. These systems are for the most part owned and controlled by giant corporations, for whom profit, not human need, is the decisive criterion. Those systems that are nominally controlled by the government, such as roads and bridges, are likewise subordinated to profit interests, through the control of the political system by the wealthy elite.

In the case of America's bridges, the anarchy and irrationality are palpable. There is no national plan for the maintenance of the system. Decisions on repair and construction of vital economic and social lifelines are left to the states and localities, and oversight is divided between all three levels of government.

The most salient and noxious expression of the irrational and socially destructive character of the profit system is the massive concentration of wealth at the very top of society. According to a recent study, in 2005 the top one-tenth of one percent of the US

population (some 300,000 people) had nearly as much income as the bottom 150 million Americans.

That the wealth exists to pay the \$1.6 trillion which the American Society of Civil Engineers estimates is needed to upgrade the country's infrastructure—and more—is demonstrated by a few facts. *Forbes* magazine reported earlier this year that there are 946 billionaires around the world, with a combined wealth of \$3.5 trillion. Last December, Christmas bonuses paid to Wall Street executives topped \$100 billion. That figure alone is more than twice the annual federal allocation of \$40 billion for the country's roads and bridges.

And in 2006, the 25 highest paid hedge fund managers in the US had an average income of \$540 million, for a total of \$13.5 billion. The total subordination of the two major US parties to the financial oligarchy is demonstrated by the unwillingness of the Democratic Congress to end the existing tax windfall for hedge fund and private equity operators, who pay at the 15 percent capital gains rates instead of the 35 percent top income tax rate.

Events like the collapse of the Minnesota bridge are exposing the bankruptcy of the political establishment and the corporate elite, along with their insistence that the unchecked operations of capitalism are the solution to all of society's problems.

This poses the most fundamental questions before the working class. What are the priorities of society to be: the social interests of the many or the accumulation of personal wealth by the privileged few? It is not a matter of pressuring the ruling elite, or replacing one section of that elite with another. The working class must organize itself as a political force and make itself the master of society. This requires the creation of a new political party of the working class, independent of and opposed to the Democrats and Republicans, and based on a socialist program.



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