Ohio floods: another example of America's failing infrastructure

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The residents of Ottawa, Ohio, one of the many small Midwest towns hit by recent flooding that has caused at least 18 deaths, are beginning the process of cleaning up and assessing damages. They are doing so, in large part, alone.

After a week of powerful storms and record flooding, Governor Ted Strickland on Sunday called on the Bush administration to declare north central Ohio a major disaster area and provide emergency relief.

A reporting team from the WSWS visited Ottawa, a town of 4,300 people located on the Blanchard River about 65 miles southwest of Toledo. Talking to residents, we heard stories of cooperation and social solidarity among neighbors and family. However, we also heard that little to no assistance was provided by the government agencies and institutions that were designed to assist in such emergencies, but due to lack of funding are no longer able to do so.

The damage caused by the flooding is of devastating, historic proportions. Leon Hopkins, who said he had six inches of water on the first floor of his rented house, told the WSWS that he had heard this flood referred to as the "100 year flood." Lester Flores, who lives next to the flooding Blanchard River, said he had three feet of water in his house and wondered whether his house was salvageable. Mr. Flores's wife, Beth, standing outside their house, recalled how she had found worms in the refrigerator and worried that their children would be unable to start school on time.

As this reporter spoke to the residents, he watched groups of people cross yards to help their neighbors; he also heard these same residents tell touching stories of the help they received from their family and neighbors. Mr. Flores called his family "more fortunate" than others because his sister had offered them the use of her house for the time being. He also spoke of an unknown woman who had driven through their neighborhood distributing sandwiches and water.

But this reporter also quickly learned that the Ottawa residents could count on little else from other sources. Mr. Hopkins reported having seen a few National Guardsmen in town, but their only duty seemed to have been patrolling the streets and "keeping order." He also said that a private company had brought sub pumps into the town, but the city officials lacked the money to write checks for the pumps, so the residents went without.

Another possible source of assistance, flood insurance, also proved questionable at best. The woman who rented to Leon Hopkins admitted to being unable to afford the $400 annual fee for flood insurance. While Lester Flores was able to afford flood insurance, it did not cover his personal belongings and his deductible was $5,000.

All of the residents expressed disappointment in and bitterness toward the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Mr. Hopkins said he heard FEMA was supposed to have provided assistance, but he had only seen Red Cross distribute some clothing and food. Mr. Flores said a town meeting scheduled for Monday, August 27, was to include FEMA representatives, but he was not convinced they would show. His wife, Beth, said that she and others had heard from FEMA that they could go to Red Cross for tetanus shots (a disease not uncommon to flooded areas), only to find out that Red Cross had run out of the medicine.

Several residents cited a similar failure of support prior to the recent flood—support which, they argued, might have averted or at least lessened the severity of the flood.

Mr. Hopkins and Mr. Flores both pointed out that nothing had been done following two floods that had occurred earlier this year. Mr. Hopkins added that most Ottawa residents were in agreement that widening the river would lessen the possibility and severity of flooding, especially as Ottawa's geographical location between larger industrial areas on the Blanchard River had turned

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the town into “a kind of bottleneck.” Beth Flores said that following the earlier floods, no one had inspected the Ottawa bridges for signs of erosion, which had left her concerned that one of the bridges might collapse, like the tragedy that occurred recently in Minnesota. She added that while the bridge near their house had been completely covered by the most recent flood, neither she nor anyone else she knew had seen authorities inspecting the bridge.

The failure to maintain Ottawa’s infrastructure and to prepare for more floods was not due to a lack of concern by local authorities or the impracticability of bridge repair. Rather, as Ottawa Mayor Tony Iriti learned in a trip to Washington following the two earlier floods, it is a lack of funding and concern from federal authorities.

In March of this year, the mayor went to Washington to present his case for congressional authorization for the Army Corps of Engineers to begin a feasibility study of the Blanchard River. As *The Blade* (the major Toledo, Ohio, newspaper) reported on August 28, “Nothing happened.” Findlay at-large councilman H. Richard Rowe discussed the problem in greater detail: “It’s not a lack of ability. It’s a lack of money and a lack of getting the attention of other agencies that really have the final say.”

“Legally,” he explained, “the city cannot touch the river without FEMA and the Army Corps of Engineers giving the OK, and in some cases, they have to do the work.”

The devastation of areas like Ottawa is only the most recent example of America’s failing infrastructure. Beginning with Katrina, Americans have experienced and witnessed the destruction of large cities, towns, and bridges, all while taxes for the rich and corporations continue to be cut. Billions of dollars—soon to be a trillion—are thrown into the bottomless hole that is the war in Iraq, where National Guard troops enforce a criminal occupation instead of helping the victims of natural disasters.

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