

The flooding in the US South

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An extensive area of the central and southern United States has been affected since mid-April by flooding of historic proportions along the Mississippi River. Cities critical to the daily functioning of the country are endangered, millions of acres of farmland have been submerged, and hundreds of thousands of people confront economic disaster.

Some of the worst flooding in nearly a century has taken place. Over the weekend, low-income neighborhoods in Memphis, Tennessee were inundated as the Mississippi crested at 48 feet, 14 feet above flood stage and just inches from the record set in 1937.

The economic toll is already estimated to be in the billions. Louisiana estimates it will be hit by least \$4 billion in damages; Arkansas has suffered \$500 million in crop losses alone. The worst could be yet to come, as the flood crest moves down the Mississippi, expected to inundate the delta region sometime late next week.

As is always the case in environmental catastrophes, the poorest sections of the population are the most devastated. Many of those living in known floodplains have no flood insurance, savings, or prospects of rebuilding.

In the face of this mounting calamity, the Obama administration has explicitly refused to coordinate a significant federal response, emphasizing repeatedly that state and local governments—many already mired in a fiscal crisis—are to be responsible for the recovery efforts. As the administration moves to slash social spending by trillions, it wants to head off any suggestion that the federal government might do something to aid those seeing their livelihoods destroyed.

The US Army Corps of Engineers has conducted a chaotic state-by-state campaign. A vast agricultural area of southeastern Missouri was washed out last week after the Corps was forced to dynamite a levee to protect the town of Cairo, Illinois. Other important

farmland in Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana has already been affected.

The South has suffered a number of recent disasters. Hurricane Katrina wrecked much of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in 2005, killing 1,836 and displacing hundreds of thousands. In 2010, the BP oil disaster fouled the Gulf of Mexico, the ongoing impact of which is now ignored by the media. Torrential “thousand-year” rains flooded much of the mid-South last spring, including the city of Nashville, Tennessee. Barely two weeks ago, tornado-laden storms swept through the region, leaving 330 dead and thousands injured or homeless.

Such disasters are by no means unique to the South or to the US. Internationally, the past few years have seen one disaster following another, including most recently the devastating earthquake in Japan. This year alone, floods have wreaked havoc in Australia, Sri Lanka, and Europe.

Invariably, the political and media establishment describes such devastation as unforeseeable and unpreventable, an “act of God.” These platitudes are intended to obscure the social relations that invariably intersect with and intensify the consequences of natural disasters.

The US South suffers from chronic economic distress, with double-digit poverty and unemployment, and millions of households barely subsisting on the income from low-wage jobs. Masses of poor and working class families reside in low-lying communities along the Mississippi and its tributary rivers where real estate developers have built cheaply and without oversight in flood-prone areas.

Flooding is a natural occurrence, yet it is hardly unpredictable. Climatologists have long forecast an increase in severe weather events such as blizzards and tornado cells, and urged the government to improve its

infrastructure. Following the heavy snowfall last winter across the northern Midwest, meteorologists warned about the danger of spring flooding along the Mississippi and its tributaries.

Yet nothing was done to prepare and defend the population. Critical infrastructure throughout the country is in a shambles, having been under-funded, under-maintained, and under-regulated for decades.

In the wake of severe flooding in 1927 which left 1,000 dead and 600,000 homeless in the Mississippi watershed, the US government undertook the building of the most extensive system of levees in the world. The largest public works program that had ever been undertaken, the project was inadequate at the time from the point of view of protecting growing towns along the waterways.

Today the flood system is in dire disrepair. Nationally, the federal government regulates only 11 percent of all dams, according to the American Society of Civil Engineers in its annual report card for infrastructure.

High-hazard dams have increased by 3,300 since 2007, to more than 15,200. The Army Corps reports that 9 percent of its levees are expected to fail in a flood event, many in areas that have seen tremendous population growth in the decades since the levees were constructed.

The ruling elite responds to crises created by deregulation and the unfettered operation of the “free market” by placing recovery under the management of private corporations, thus guaranteeing further disasters. In the case of both Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill, homeowners and small businesses have been devastated, while the financial interests have been protected and even seen their dominance strengthened.

Over the past four decades, Democratic and Republican administrations alike have overseen a systematic dismantling of governmental oversight. In January, President Barack Obama issued an executive order for the review of all federal regulations to eliminate all those that are determined not to justify the costs for “affected stakeholders in the private sector.”

The 2011 floods once again reveal the incompatibility of a modern society and the protection of its people with an economic order that subordinates every aspect of life to the demands of private profit. The most

elementary social measures are ruled out in advance because they are seen as impinging on the wealth and profits of the aristocracy that rules America.

Those who have seen their homes and livelihoods destroyed by the flooding in the South must be made whole through emergency aid relief. A public works program is urgently needed to undertake the reconstruction of the levee system. Tens of thousands in the region who are out of work could be given immediate employment. Safe housing, public shelters, warning systems and evacuation programs must be built. The rebuilding of the devastated areas has to be planned rationally, with a scientific appreciation for the complexities of the environment and based on the needs of society for safe, healthy, and stable environmental conditions.

None of these social needs can be met so long as the vast wealth created by the labor of the working class is appropriated by the corporate and financial elite. If there is to be a genuine recovery in disaster-stricken regions, it will only come on the basis of the mobilization of working people against the system that endangers them, and for the public control of the wealth they create. This is the fight for socialism.

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