

Victims of Mississippi flood must be made whole

Jerry White
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US authorities opened the Morganza Spillway in Louisiana this weekend to divert floodwaters from the swelling Mississippi River, which threaten to inundate New Orleans, Baton Rouge and several chemical plants and oil refineries. This action will send raging waters into the Atchafalaya Basin, a 3,000 square mile area home to several largely poor Bayou towns.

The homes, workplaces and farms of the area's 24,000 residents are expected to be under water for weeks or even months, wiping out people's livelihoods and everything they've worked for. The governor of Louisiana has sent sheriffs and national guardsmen to enforce mandatory evacuation notices, telling residents of the area to pack up whatever they can carry.

The federal government is providing essentially no compensation to flood victims in Louisiana, Tennessee and elsewhere on the Mississippi River.

The Obama administration has allocated only a minimal amount in grants for temporary housing and other emergency needs. It is urging those affected—most of whom have no flood insurance or means of rebuilding—to apply for federal disaster and other government loans. In addition to having to pay interest, those who qualify for federal disaster loans are compelled to buy flood insurance to qualify for future assistance.

Like the Bush administration's response to Hurricane Katrina, the Obama administration has shown callousness and indifference to the plight of the workers and poor families hit by the latest disaster.

The diversion of floodwaters helps ExxonMobil and other big oil companies operating refineries along the Mississippi River, but the administration has never raised that these corporations—rolling in cash from skyrocketing gas prices—should in any way help compensate those being flooded out of their homes and

farms.

Is there any doubt that if the shoe were on the other foot, and the companies were damaged by a government decision to flood an area, public money would be found to compensate them? On Saturday, Obama once again demonstrated his support for Big Oil by announcing plans to expand drilling in the Gulf of Mexico, Alaska and the Eastern Seaboard—little more than a year after the BP Gulf disaster.

The Mississippi flood disaster is an indictment of the entire political system in the US and the criminality of the corporations. Trillions in public funds have been looted to bail out the Wall Street swindlers and subsidize the rich. At the same time, America's infrastructure is in disrepair and victims of natural—and man-made—disasters are ruined and left to fend for themselves.

In its disregard for the basic needs of the population, today's ruling elite goes even further than the pro-business politicians of earlier eras.

During the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, a group of New Orleans businessmen and bankers insisted on destroying the levees protecting St. Bernard Parish in order to head off floodwaters approaching the city. They obtained the support of President Calvin Coolidge and flooded the parish to avoid damage to their banks and businesses. They then reneged on promises to compensate residents, who ultimately received pennies on the dollar for their losses.

The arrogance of the New Orleans elite and the entire establishment toward the working class and poor helped bolster the fortunes of Huey Long, the populist who shortly afterwards became Louisiana governor and later a US senator. The flood also sparked significant reforms, including the Flood Control Act, the single largest public expenditure in US history up to that time

outside of World War I. The government launched a massive federal program to strengthen flood control up and down the Mississippi, including redesigning and upgrading levees.

Nothing like these programs, as insufficient as they have proven to be, is proposed by big business politicians today. The financial aristocracy that controls the Republican and Democratic parties and every level of government bases its wealth on deindustrializing the country and slashing jobs, wages, and living standards. Its policy is to leave critical infrastructure to rot.

No region of the United States has suffered more as a result. Nearly six years after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, the levees in that city have been rebuilt only to preexisting levels, which proved inadequate when the city was flooded in 2005. As for the 2010 Gulf oil spill that devastated the region, the pledges of BP and the US government to help the millions affected by the disaster have come to nothing.

Instead, the Obama administration is slashing vital infrastructure spending to prove its loyalty to the financial elite. In his 2012 budget proposal, Obama calls for a \$913 million cut in the already meager \$5.4 billion budget of the Army Corps of Engineers civil works program. This includes a one-third reduction in funding for projects on the Mississippi River and its tributaries.

All of those who have been affected by the flooding must be made whole. Billions of dollars must be allocated for the reconstruction of damaged homes, farms and other small businesses and to compensate for lost income. A massive public works program must be launched to hire the unemployed and rebuild and modernize the levee system along the Mississippi River and all US waterways.

Such a massive undertaking is impossible, however, without a struggle to break the power of the financial aristocracy over American life. The necessary funds and resources are monopolized by oil companies, giant banks and other big corporations. The working class faces a revolutionary struggle to retake this wealth and make human need, not private profit, the guiding principle of economic life.

For the working class to advance its own solution to the economic and social crisis, a new political movement must be built, opposed to the two parties of big business and fighting for workers' power and

socialism.

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