

Obama's Katrina

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The devastation of New Orleans and much of the Mississippi Gulf Coast in August 2005 by Hurricane Katrina exposed the incompetence and criminal indifference of the Bush administration. A great American city was virtually destroyed by the failure of the levees maintained by the US Army Corps of Engineers. The rescue effort was botched by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, while Bush gave his thumbs-up to FEMA chief Michael Brown, declaring he was doing “a heckuva job.” More than a thousand people died in New Orleans alone and half a million fled the hurricane zone, many never to return.

In recent months the Obama administration has presided over a series of smaller-scale Katrinas in rural and small-town America. Vicksburg, Mississippi; Tuscaloosa, Alabama; Joplin, Missouri and Minot, North Dakota are just the best known of the towns laid waste. In each case, natural disasters have become social disasters because of neglect and indifference on the part of the state and especially the federal government.

While the extreme weather phenomena of the past three months no doubt owes something to global warming, the American Midwest, South and Southwest have long and tragic experience with floods, tornadoes and wildfires. These phenomena are as familiar in the vast territory drained by the Missouri and Mississippi rivers as are hurricanes along the Gulf of Mexico. But the response of state and federal governments demonstrates the same mixture of unpreparedness beforehand and callousness afterwards that made Katrina a national and international disgrace.

The water volumes passing through the lower Mississippi River in May and the upper reaches of the Missouri River and rivers further north this month overwhelmed the flood control systems run by the Army Corps of Engineers and its state counterparts. These disasters were completely predictable—along the

Missouri, for instance, and the Souris River, which deluged Minot, accurate projections of water flow were made weeks ahead of time by measuring the snowpack in the US and Canadian Rockies.

Yet there were repeated instances where dam managers and reservoir engineers had to release enormous quantities of water, with devastating consequences downstream, because the existing dams and levees were facing imminent collapse. In several cases, most notably in Louisiana and Missouri, decisions were made to flood one area in order to lessen the danger to another. Baton Rouge and New Orleans were spared, but only by diverting floodwaters into the less populous Atchafalaya River basin.

Storm cells and tornadoes are less individually predictable than floods, but the outbreak of such sudden and violent storms is a well-known feature of the region, particularly in those areas of Oklahoma, Kansas and Missouri that have acquired the nickname “Tornado Alley.” The storms that devastated parts of the South in April and destroyed one-third of Joplin, Missouri on May 22 demonstrated both the inadequacy of the tornado warning systems and, particularly in the rural south, the poor quality of the housing stock.

The wildfires that have devastated areas as widely separated as eastern Arizona and coastal North Carolina are another natural disaster with a powerful social component. Decades of inadequate investment in land management, particularly in the national forests, has combined with severe drought conditions to create optimum conditions for infernos that have burned more acreage in the past month than in all of 2010. On Monday, one of the biggest such fires forced the evacuation of Los Alamos, New Mexico, a city of 12,000.

The impact of these disasters could become dramatically worse if, as in Japan, a natural catastrophe damages a nuclear facility and triggers a release of

radioactive materials. Three US nuclear facilities are currently threatened—two power plants along the Missouri River in Nebraska, which have declared low-level emergencies because of the flooding, and Los Alamos, the largest US nuclear weapons research center, with huge stores of nuclear waste.

The lack of preparation for natural disasters is compounded by the refusal of the federal government to provide the necessary emergency relief and compensation for the victims. Tens of thousands of people have lost their homes, their jobs or their small businesses to floods, tornadoes and wildfires, with little or no assistance.

In Minot, for example, 4,000 homes have been inundated, and less than 500 have flood insurance, in large measure because the federal government stopped requiring it in 2000 after a study that concluded improvements in the river's flood management system, including new dams, had made a major flood far less likely. Instead, the Souris River topped a 130-year-old flood record by eight feet. So far in North Dakota, FEMA has limited its aid to the cities of Minot and Bismarck and their surrounding counties, although many rural counties are equally devastated. Those who are able to survive the bureaucratic hurdles to obtaining federal grants or loans can expect only a few thousand dollars in aid.

In Alabama, there are media reports of FEMA inspectors denying claims based on a finding of “insufficient damage” in cases where little was left of a home beyond the concrete slab on which it once stood. One homeowner lost three outer walls and half the roof, and received a letter describing the losses as “minor damage... it is reasonable to expect you or your landlord to make these repairs.”

Only 14,218 of the 82,250 applications for FEMA assistance in Alabama have been approved, nearly two months after a record number of tornadoes tore through the state. According to the *Birmingham News*, “FEMA officials point out that the agency is not meant to restore storm victims to the state they were before the storm, but to jumpstart the recovery and rebuilding process.”

In East Tennessee, out of 6,731 applications for FEMA assistance for tornado damage, only 1,229 had been approved, while more than 2,000 applications were denied as ineligible.

In Washington, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives has slashed federal disaster relief funding and demanded that any increased spending due to the unprecedented slew of extreme weather events be offset dollar-for-dollar by budget cuts in other domestic social programs.

This series of natural disasters have underscored the failure of American capitalism, which is incapable either of making the necessary preparations in advance, or mobilizing after the event the resources of society in a rapid and humane relief and recovery effort.

All those who have been devastated by the floods, tornadoes and wildfires should be made whole, with billions of dollars allocated for the reconstruction of damaged homes, farms and other small businesses and for compensation for lost income. A massive public works program should be launched to hire the unemployed and rebuild and modernize levee and flood control systems, tornado warning systems, and land management and fire prevention.

The resources needed for such an effort exist in abundance in America—still the wealthiest country in the world—but they have been monopolized by the financial aristocracy that exercises a stranglehold over both the US economy and the government.

To fight this corporate elite, and its two political parties, the Democrats and Republicans, the working class must build an independent mass political movement of its own, committed to a revolutionary struggle for socialist policies, to make human need, not private profit, the organizing principle of economic life.

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