

Hurricane Irene and the decay of US infrastructure

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In the days leading up to Irene's landfall as a Category 1 hurricane last Saturday, East Coast residents from the Carolinas to New England were warned to expect substantial power outages. Although Irene did not strike with the intensity that had been predicted in some areas, the storm was powerful, leaving at least 35 people dead.

Some 5.48 million homes and businesses were without electricity along the Eastern Seaboard as of Monday afternoon. The massive power outages serve as a stark reminder of the decrepit state of the US infrastructure in general, and the country's electrical grid in particular.

The widespread loss of power cannot be explained simply as a result of forces of nature beyond human control. Rather, what is exposed is a system that cannot provide the most basic necessities to the population, and subordinates the generation and delivery of energy to private profit.

The scope of the outages has been staggering, affecting major metropolitan areas in some of the most densely populated parts of the country, including New York City, the world financial capital. Power disruptions have affected homes and businesses in 13 states and Washington DC, mainly due to downed power lines struck by high winds and fallen trees. In every area, both the immediate and long-term consequences for the economy and the population are significant.

According to a US Energy Department report, among those who lost power were: more than 1 million customers in Virginia and North Carolina; 44 percent of the state of Connecticut, affecting some 693,000 homes and businesses; 64 percent of Rhode Island; and one fifth of Maryland, New Jersey, Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

As of Monday, an estimated 938,519 customers in New York State were without electricity, including 6,800 homes and businesses on Staten Island and about 55,800 in Westchester County, north of New York City. Irene hit New York City as a tropical storm on Sunday, not the Category 1 hurricane that had been predicted by many forecasters.

The government, particularly in New York City, seized on the hurricane as an opportunity to essentially shut down the entire city, including public transportation. As always, natural disasters become an occasion for flexing the muscles of the state and trying out procedures to be used in the event of social unrest. Meanwhile, absolutely nothing will be done to address crumbling infrastructure and the consequences for ordinary citizens of a system plagued by vast social inequality.

Some 370,000 people in low-lying areas were given a mandatory order to evacuate, a directive a substantial number of New Yorkers chose to ignore. It is worth noting that there was no evacuation order for the estimated 12,000 inmates at the Rikers Island prison, located on the East River between Queens and the Bronx.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg ordered an unprecedented shutdown of the entire New York transit system, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), which serves over 11 million passengers on an average weekday. The system reopened on a limited basis on Monday, as transit authorities said they would have to visually inspect all the lines. Much of the system operates on century-old technology and the signal system dates to the 19th century.

The MTA is \$31 billion in debt and has a \$900 million gap in its operating budget for 2011. Instead of investing in an overhaul and upgrade of the system, the

transit authority has raised fares, cut lines and service and laid off thousands of workers. A telling footnote: during the storm, some of New York City's homeless population—which number more 40,000 on any particular night—took shelter in the shutdown subway stations.

New York's financial elite, on the other hand, made sure that the New York Stock Exchange and other institutions in Lower Manhattan were protected with sandbags and that generators were on standby to make sure that markets opened on Monday morning.

Additionally, all but the most retrograde elements of the political establishment are well aware of the growing effect of global warming on meteorological events. Scientists are in general agreement that as the earth's oceans rise in temperature, the warmer waters will fuel hurricanes and typhoons of higher intensity. Yet no meaningful government or corporate action can be taken to reverse this trend.

In relation to the electrical grid in the US, it is well known that it is outdated and inadequate. Almost all power lines in the US are above ground, transmitted by aging lines and poles. As residents in many parts of the country know, a hurricane isn't required to cause an outage. An average thunderstorm or ice storm can be all it takes to knock out power for days.

The impact of the hurricane is yet one more expression of the consequences of two interrelated processes: the long-term decline of American capitalism and the rise of a parasitic financial aristocracy that is completely incapable of such things as long-term planning and social investment. This social layer that has made trillions speculating on the market has largely insulated itself and its wealth from the development of the productive forces and society as a whole.

Meanwhile, over the course of the past three decades, entire industries—trucking, airlines, telecommunications, energy—have been let loose from all regulations and constraints on profit-gouging. For workers, this has meant an unending attack on jobs and wages, and for the general population it has meant soaring prices, deteriorating service, and utility shutoffs.

Trillions are handed out to the banks, but nothing can be made available to meet basic social needs. One disaster after another—from Hurricane Katrina, to the

BP oil disaster, to the tornadoes that have wreaked havoc on much of the country this year—exposed the decay of society. The vast majority of the country is in a state of retrogression.

With some 26 million jobless in the US, the unemployed could be mobilized in a public works program to rebuild roads, mass transportation, water and sewage systems, communications networks, as well as schools, hospitals and public housing. But nothing of the sort can be proposed. The political establishment, led by the Obama administration, instead responds to the economic crisis it has created by slashing trillions in federal spending.

Hurricane Irene will not be the last such disaster to strike, and there is much work to be done to aid in the recovery. But those who are suffering in the storm's aftermath can expect little governmental assistance forthcoming. As with the victims of previous hurricanes, tornadoes and other disasters, they will be left on their own to deal with damage to their homes and livelihoods when news of their plight cycles out of the headlines.

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