

Seven years after the Katrina disaster

Hurricane Isaac pounds Gulf Coast

Andre Damon
30 August 2012

Hurricane Isaac made landfall in eastern Louisiana Wednesday morning, forcing thousands of people to flee, leaving hundreds of thousands without power, and causing untold millions of dollars in property damage.

Isaac has invoked comparisons to Hurricane Katrina, which exactly seven years ago flooded much of New Orleans, killed nearly 2,000 people, and forever changed the way millions of people viewed American society. As was the case then, the natural component of the current disaster intersects with the social conditions of American life, including massive inequality and the decay of the social infrastructure.

On Wednesday morning the storm surge overran a levee in Plaquemines Parish on the Mississippi Delta, west of New Orleans, flooding the area and forcing over a hundred people to seek rescue on their rooftops. Over 3,000 parish residents were told to evacuate their homes. Many of those who stayed said they did so because they had no place to go.

“We haven’t seen anything like this, not even with Katrina,” said Plaquemines Parish President Billy Nungesser. “Those areas that didn’t flood for Katrina were flooded for this storm. If this is a Category 1 storm, I don’t want to see anything stronger.”

Plaquemines Parish, which saw some of the worst flooding in 2005, was left to pay for its own levees in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Some 800 homes have been flooded so far by Isaac.

Water levels continue to rise throughout the parish, likely leading to more topped levees. On Wednesday evening, officials announced that they would deliberately breach one levee—leading to certain flooding of some homes—in order to reduce levels elsewhere.

In New Orleans, the storm toppled trees and brought down power lines. Over 600,000 Louisiana residents were without power Wednesday, nearly a third of them in New Orleans.

As of Wednesday evening, the battery of levees protecting New Orleans appeared to have remained intact, but meteorologists warned that the storm, which is creeping across Louisiana at seven miles per hour, will continue to lash the area with winds and rain. More inland regions face the prospect of extensive flooding over the next several days.

In the years following Katrina, some \$14 billion was expended on an updated levee system for New Orleans, but the city is still not equipped to withstand the most powerful hurricanes.

The Louisiana National Guard has been deployed in New Orleans, officially to prevent looting. The city likewise announced a dusk-to-dawn curfew, to be enforced by guardsmen armed with automatic rifles. City officials said Wednesday afternoon that three people had been arrested for looting, which carries a term of three-to-five years in jail at hard labor.

Isaac, coming on the anniversary of Katrina, has unnerved the political establishment. It hit land on the second day of the Republican National Convention in Tampa, Florida and only a week before the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina. Both big business parties have been deeply compromised by the devastation wrought by Katrina and the subsequent disasters that have hit the area.

As the hurricane pounded Louisiana Wednesday evening, Republican vice presidential candidate Paul

Ryan gave a speech to the Republican National Convention in which he pledged to take forward the drive, supported by both parties, to slash health care and other vital social programs.

The Republicans were careful not to strike too celebratory a tone and delayed the start of convention activities by one day. Both parties and the entire political establishment fear that Isaac could expose the completely inadequate response to the Katrina disaster and the extreme vulnerability of hundreds of thousands of people in the region to a major storm seven years later.

The 2005 storm led to nearly 2,000 deaths and \$108 billion in damage after the New Orleans levee system was breached, flooding most of the city in one of the largest civil engineering failures in US history. The failure of the levees was compounded by the inadequacy of rescue efforts and the absence of a coordinated evacuation strategy, which left thousands stranded on rooftops for days.

The destruction wrought by the hurricane was seized upon by federal, state and local officials as an opportunity to slash social services, privatize New Orleans' public education system, and force a large section of the city's poor people to permanently leave. New Orleans now has the second-highest level of social inequality of any large city in the United States. It also has the second-highest homeless rate of any large city in the country.

Hurricane Katrina was a seminal event in the consciousness of millions of people. It exposed the callous indifference of the ruling class and the entire political system to the conditions of working and poor people, and the abject poverty affecting millions throughout the United States. The use of the national guard and police to impose a virtual police state—including police killings of several of those stranded—placed in sharp relief the militarization of American society and the advanced stage of decay of American democracy.

The social diseases revealed by Katrina—poverty, inequality, the decay of infrastructure, the rapaciousness of the ruling class—have in no way abated in the seven years since that disaster. When New Orleans was flooded, the country's poverty rate stood at 12.6 percent. Since then it has shot up by almost a fifth, to 15.1 percent. The

national unemployment rate has gone from 5.0 percent to 8.3 percent.

In the intervening years, the country witnessed the financial crash of 2008 and the multi-trillion-dollar bank bailouts, first under Bush and then under Obama. The \$14 billion expended on levees in New Orleans is a drop in the bucket compared to the vast sums handed over to Wall Street to protect the wealth of the parasites and speculators whose avarice and recklessness precipitated the crisis.

The financial crash was followed in 2010 by the BP oil spill, devastating the environment and economy of a large region along the Gulf. The economy of Plaquemines Parish, which depends on fishing, shrimping and crabbing in the areas poisoned by the spill, was particularly hard hit.

The BP disaster revealed in different form the same social conditions exposed by Katrina—above all, the complete subordination of American society to the banks and giant corporations. More than two years later, the spill continues to affect the area, while the profits of BP have been guaranteed by the Obama administration.

Whatever the ultimate damage caused by Isaac, the response of the government and corporate elite will be the same: defense of corporate interests, indifference to the masses of people affected, and continuation of the same policies that contributed to the disaster.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact