

Hurricane Isaac ... and the seven years since Hurricane Katrina

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Whatever the ultimate damage caused by Hurricane Isaac in the Gulf Coast region of the US, the new storm has underscored once again the depths of the social crisis in America and the dramatic failure of its political system.

No thinking human being can honestly believe it is impossible for the “richest country on earth” to protect its people from a Category 1 hurricane. Yet, once again, parts of Louisiana and Mississippi are being flooded, some 900,000 people are without electricity, and tens of thousands of Gulf Coast residents face evacuation.

Seven years ago, the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina were a damning indictment of American capitalism. The combination of crumbling infrastructure, the official refusal to listen to warnings about the levee system, the overall lack of preparedness, and the conditions of the poorest sections of the population, led to a terrible human tragedy. At least 1,800 died, and 80 percent of New Orleans was submerged, with 70 percent of its housing units damaged and tens of thousands trapped in the city for days without food, drinking water or assistance.

In effect, the American ruling elite, supposedly obsessed with “homeland security” in the wake of September 11, 2001, showed itself willing to allow one of its major cities, with an incomparably rich cultural and social history, to disappear from the face of the earth. There was no precedent in US history for what happened.

And from the point of view of the vast majority in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, there has been no “recovery” since 2005.

Entrepreneur-vultures took advantage of the crisis to rake in fortunes while large numbers of poor, mostly black residents were permanently driven out of New Orleans. The “reinvented” city has 125,000 less people

than it did in 2000. Meanwhile, more than 20 percent of its addresses are blighted or abandoned. New Orleans ranks second among US cities in both income inequality and rate of homelessness. Forty-two percent of the city’s children live in poverty.

New Orleans and the state of Louisiana have the highest rates of incarceration in the world. Louisiana imprisons people at a rate five times higher than Iran, 13 times higher than China. In New Orleans, one of every seven black men is in prison, on parole or on probation.

The federal government has spent a fraction (3 percent, by some estimates) of the cost of destroying Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001 on “rebuilding” the Gulf Coast. The \$14 billion put into (inadequately) improving Louisiana’s levee system is what the US pours into the war in Afghanistan in less than two months. Following the financial crisis of September 2008, trillions of dollars were made available to the banks, with essentially no strings attached.

In these figures, one catches a glimpse of the real state of social relations in the US today: the powers that be will go to any lengths to enrich themselves, defend their ill-gotten gains and extend their global reach. For the elementary needs of wide layers of the population, we are daily reminded, “there is no money.”

In the actions of the American ruling elite it is always difficult to distinguish between cost-cutting, indifference, short-sightedness, criminal neglect and outright thievery. All are present in the ongoing nightmare for the Gulf Coast, reeling from the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, the economic collapse set off in 2008, the BP oil spill in 2010, and now a new storm.

However, the suffering experienced by the working class in the area is only an especially concentrated form

of the misery inflicted on the population as a whole. Since 2005, the generalized conditions of life in the US have measurably worsened. Household income has plummeted, decent jobs are almost a thing of the past and, more and more, millions of families have to choose between paying for food, housing or medical care.

The near financial collapse of 2008 has only brought the White House and Congress into a more intimate, incestuous relationship with Wall Street. The Obama administration identifies itself with the financial elite and its interests unlike any government in modern US history. Addressing a single serious social problem is impossible, when bankers hold veto power over every important government decision.

Appropriately, the Republican and Democratic national conventions are taking place in the shadow of the latest disaster. These politicians speak for the top one percent, or one-tenth of one percent, of the population.

A guilty conscience is beyond the moral capacity of these parties and their leading figures, but the approach of Hurricane Isaac unquestionably caused them anxiety. Mitt Romney and the Republicans were justifiably concerned that millions would recall the performance in 2005 of the Bush administration, whose callousness and gross incompetence led to countless deaths and ruined the lives of thousands of others. The “national humiliation,” as the WSWS termed it, certainly contributed to the Republicans’ loss in the 2008 election.

For their part, Obama and the Democrats could only feel unease about the new hurricane, since nothing has been done since 2009 to repair the country’s infrastructure; they are well aware that another Katrina is perfectly possible on their watch.

There is widespread and legitimate popular disgust with the two-party system. A recent Pew Research poll found majorities uninterested in either party’s national convention. Thirty-eight percent of those surveyed said they were following the conditions of the US economy very closely in August, while little more than a quarter were following election news with great interest. No one should believe, and probably relatively few do, that keeping Obama in office or replacing him with Romney would make a significant difference.

In 1904, a leading European newspaper, in response

to Russian defeats in the Russo-Japanese war, declared, “Sentence has been passed upon an entire political system. ... The hard, brutal fact shatters all conventional lies.” The tsarist regime faced revolutionary convulsions before too long. The political system in the US is no less sclerotic, out of touch and rotten to the core.

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