

The social disaster in Tornado Alley

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The immediate cause of the disaster wrought on Moore, Oklahoma this week was natural in character: a massive tornado with winds that surpassed 200 miles per hour. Yet, as with so many similar events in America, the consequences were immensely compounded by social and economic conditions.

At least 24 people have been killed, and 240 more were injured. Among the dead were ten children. These deaths were entirely preventable—the direct product of the lack of adequate infrastructure and safety protection in what is known as “Tornado Alley.”

If there is any city in the United States where emergency measures should have been taken to ensure protection from tornadoes, it is Moore. Indeed, the city is perhaps best known for its repeated encounters with tornadoes. In 1999, the strongest tornado ever recorded near the earth’s surface tore a strip through the same area that was struck Monday, killing 42.

The fact that, some fourteen years later, almost nothing has been done to protect residents from tornadoes is a crime for which the entire political establishment stands condemned.

The technology already exists to construct tornado-proof structures and “safe houses,” as well as to build houses that are more resistant to the elements. For example, more than twenty people were saved from disaster in Moore after taking refuge in a bank vault, which was left standing Monday after the entire building surrounding it was swept away.

A residential safe room can be installed for \$8,000. A safe room in a public place like a school can be built for \$1.4 million. Yet only a small minority of houses have these structures, and only 100 of Oklahoma’s schools. As a result, two-dozen people are dead, including the seven children sheltering after school in Plaza Towers Elementary.

As always, the reason cited by the political establishment, Democrat and Republican, and accepted

by the mass media—to the extent these issues are even raised—is that there are no resources, that these are “difficult times.” What obscenities!

A single one of Oklahoma’s six billionaires could pay for the installation of a safe room with his pocket change. Harold Hamm (net worth \$11.3 billion), who lives 20 minutes from Moore, donated \$1 million to the presidential campaign of Mitt Romney last year. Tulsa’s George Kaiser (net worth \$10 billion) was a top fundraising “bundler” for the Obama campaign.

The US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan carry an estimated cost of up to \$6 trillion. At \$4 million, the price of a single Predator drone like the ones raining down terror on the Afghan border could have provided for the safety of every student that was buried in rubble.

Five years into the economic crisis triggered by the speculative activity of the financial sector, the Obama administration continues to hand over \$85 billion per month to the gambling class. A single day’s payout to the banks would more than cover Oklahoma’s \$2 billion in damages.

After Obama’s perfunctory remarks, the administration is quickly moving on to more pressing matters—like implementing massive cuts in social programs. Federal assistance will turn out to be much less than pledged, with the burden of recovery operations placed on local officials. FEMA’s already threadbare budget has been cut by \$1 billion under the federal sequestration order signed by Obama in March.

While the White House leapt at the chance to mobilize a militarized police force in response to the bombing of the Boston Marathon last month, shutting down the entire city in an unprecedented attack on democratic rights, it is unable and unwilling to organize a meaningful relief effort in disaster-stricken areas.

As for the media, its coverage has studiously avoided any mention of the inequality that has fostered the dire social conditions on display. After a sufficient number

of “human interest” stories are compiled, the story will drift to the back pages until it can be safely dropped altogether.

A review of Obama’s record makes clear that the tornado victims will be abandoned the moment the doors on the news vans slam shut.

The *Washington Post* reported Wednesday that six months after the East Coast was battered by Hurricane Sandy, three quarters of small businesses that were impacted are still waiting for federal aid. Only 15 percent of the funding approved for loans has been disbursed.

In 2011, a massive tornado in Joplin, Missouri killed 162, including many whose mobile homes were completely destroyed by the winds. Volunteers bore the brunt of rebuilding. For damage estimated at \$3 billion, the city received only \$500 million, much of it in the form of loans. Joplin officials applied to the state for safe room grants, but the paltry FEMA aid had already been spent on flood relief. Thousands of uninsured families and renters lost everything.

Just last month, West, Texas was obliterated by a massive explosion at a fertilizer plant that killed 15. Obama trotted out the usual promises of support for the town. Yet FEMA only opened a Disaster Recovery Center to accept claims of residents on May 4. By May 18, the agency had closed up shop.

New Orleans, devastated by Hurricane Katrina nearly eight years ago, has 20 percent fewer residents than before the storm. The political and corporate elite used the disaster to gentrify swathes of the city previously occupied by the poor and to privatize the public school system and other social infrastructure.

The financial oligarchy’s stranglehold on social life ensures that tragedies such as the one still unfolding in Moore will be repeated.

What is required is a socialist response. The Socialist Equality Party calls for an emergency public works program in Oklahoma City and all the other areas impacted by recent disasters. Such a program would include the immediate infusion of aid to make survivors whole, rebuild infrastructure, homes and businesses.

Social infrastructure, including scientific monitoring and warning systems, must be vastly improved and expanded. Electrical grids would be rebuilt below ground in tornado-prone areas. Central planning would ensure safe and decent homes for everyone, with safe

rooms and shelters in all structures in tornado-prone areas.

This program would be financed directly through a sharp increase in taxation on the rich. The major banks and corporations must be nationalized and run as publicly owned utilities. Public resources that have been hoarded by the financial elite must be reallocated to meet urgent social needs.



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