The social catastrophe of Typhoon Haiyan

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13 November 2013

At least 10,000 are dead in the Philippines in the wake of a devastating typhoon. Only nine years after the Indian Ocean tsunami, eight years after Hurricane Katrina, and three years after the Haitian earthquake, humanity is once again confronted with the spectacle of catastrophic suffering and massive loss of life.

One million people are now housed in evacuation centers, hundreds of thousands are without food or water, and the hospitals that survived the typhoon are packed with patients suffering and dying from diseases that could be treated if medical supplies were available. The region's power, communications, and transportation infrastructure has been shattered.

There is no question that the task of building shelters that will allow masses of people to survive devastating storms like Haiyan, and rebuilding cities hit by such disasters, is formidable. With sustained wind speeds of 195 miles per hour and gusts up to 235 miles per hour, Haiyan was the worst storm to make landfall in recorded history. There is little doubt that global climate change is a factor in the increasing intensity of hurricanes and typhoons.

There is, however, a definite political agenda underlying claims by the international press, from the *Guardian* to the *New York Times*, that nothing could have withstood the typhoon's 200 mile-per-hour winds.

Pictures from the typhoon-hit city of Tacloban and its surroundings tell a different story. Businesses, malls, government buildings and mansions are still standing. The city's country club is virtually undamaged.

While Haiyan's raging winds could not be stopped, the massive toll of dead and injured and the scale of deprivation in Tacloban were not a natural, but rather a social, catastrophe. The vast majority of the typhoon's victims would have survived had they had access to solidly-built evacuation centers situated in safe locations and stocked in advance with the necessary supplies.

Among the evacuation centers in Tacloban was the city's domed sports arena. Hundreds of people fleeing before the storm were instructed to shelter in the arena by local officials. Like all solid construction in Tacloban, it withstood the storm. However, the arena was of insufficient elevation above sea level and its interior flooded. Those inside either drowned or were trampled as they struggled to rise above the inrushing water.

The neighborhoods that are now collapsed or washed away were built with cheap and flimsy materials, from which workers and poor people are forced to make their houses. Over one-third of all homes in Tacloban have wooden exterior walls, while one in seven has a grass roof, according to the Philippine Census data. University of Miami hurricane researcher Brian McNoldy said that these homes were of such "flimsy construction … a weaker storm would have still caused almost as much devastation."

A 2012 study by the World Bank revealed that four out of ten Filipinos live in a city with a population of over 100,000 that is vulnerable to storms. Despite this fact, no preparations were made in the vulnerable areas. The so-called evacuation centers are churches, municipal auditoriums and schools, which lack sanitary facilities or relief goods.

What has been exposed yet again is the fact that working people around the world, from Tacloban to Port-au-Prince to New Orleans, are forced to live in poorly-built housing, at the mercy of a major storm or other disaster.

The responsibility for this state of affairs lies not with fate, but with capitalism. Humanity has the technological capacity to prepare for typhoons, to construct and stock shelters that can survive major storms, and to rebuild entire cities.

The necessary resources cannot be mobilized due to the irrationality of the capitalist market, the profit

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motive that dominates all social endeavors, the outmoded and destructive division of the world into rival nation states, and the grotesque levels of social inequality that prevail all over the world. The necessary funds cannot be found, in large part because trillions of dollars are being shoveled into the bank accounts of "high net worth individuals," who monopolize a staggering $27 trillion in wealth worldwide.

The inability to build decent housing and storm shelters in the Philippines is of a piece with the broader conditions of deprivation imposed on the working masses by this outmoded and irrational social system.

Only four people in ten in the Philippines receive adequate nutrition, according to the National Nutrition Council. Twenty-seven per cent of the population experiences consistent involuntary hunger. Average male life expectancy in 2012 on the island of Samar, now laid waste by Haiyan, was 64.5 years—fully fifteen years less than that in Western Europe.

These conditions underscore the necessity for the working class to take control of the obscene wealth hoarded by the super-rich and use it for socially progressive purposes. Any attempt to do so will bring it face to face with the violent opposition of the capitalist state, which is currently deploying its armed might to defend private property and terrorize victims of the typhoon.

As hundreds of thousands of victims of the storm in the Philippines struggle to find food, with government relief supplies nowhere to be seen, typhoon victims are attempting to take needed food, water and supplies from shuttered stores and malls.

Philippine President Aquino has responded by deploying 1,300 heavily armed police and military personnel with armored vehicles to patrol the city and protect private property, placing the city under curfew and subjecting storm victims to arbitrary searches. He has left much of the relief effort to private agencies or—ominously—the military of the United States, the former colonial power in the Philippines.

The complex logistical operations involved in the current relief effort are only a pale indication of the vast economic efforts that will be necessary to create a society that can withstand such storms. This can be done only through the planned, international mobilization of the industrial and scientific resources of the entire region and the world, under the leadership of the working class.

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