

The flooding in South Carolina and the decay of social infrastructure

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The ongoing flooding in South Carolina and the surrounding region have once again laid bare the woefully inadequate state of public infrastructure and disaster preparedness in the United States. Fifteen years into the 21st century, the residents of major urban areas in the world's leading capitalist economy are offered essentially no protection from predictable weather events.

Seventeen people have been killed, hundreds have been evacuated and thousands of homes have been destroyed, as floods inundate major urban areas, including the state capital of Columbia. Over 500 roads and bridges have been closed and tens of thousands of homes have been left without water and electricity.

The flooding has caused over \$1 billion in damage so far. Thousands of residents, many surprised to find that their homeowners insurance does not cover flood damage, have had their lives shattered without any public assistance to speak of.

Much of this damage is attributable to the collapse of at least 18 dams, the result of South Carolina's crumbling flood-prevention infrastructure. In 2013, South Carolina was spending a staggeringly low \$65,000 per year on dam inspection, less than any other state besides Alabama, which does not have a dam inspection program at all. The American Society of Civil Engineers wrote, "In South Carolina, just one and a half dam safety inspectors are responsible for the 2,380 dams that are spread throughout the state."

South Carolina's other infrastructure does not rate much better. Over a thousand of the state's 9,275 bridges are considered structurally deficient, while 872 are considered functionally obsolete. The state's roads are the second most fatal in the US, with half of the state's secondary roads rated to be in poor condition. Many of these have been destroyed in flooding,

isolating towns and communities.

The floods were hardly unexpected. But despite the fact that the state is regularly battered by hurricanes, its emergency management infrastructure and procedures, like those of the rest of the United States, remain entirely inadequate.

The nationwide starving of resources for infrastructure is justified by endless claims that there is "no money" to pay for basic needs. Yet trillions are made available for wars and domestic repression, in the name of protecting a "homeland" totally at the mercy of natural disasters. Trillions more are funneled into the coffers of the banks and investment houses in the form of bailouts and virtually free money from the Federal Reserve.

The floods in South Carolina are taking place within two months of the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, an event that came to symbolize the indifference and contempt of the ruling elite, and, in particular, the Bush administration, toward the lives of the mass of the working class and poor in the United States.

That disaster killed 1,800 people and displaced over a million more, as the result of an entirely foreseeable, and indeed foreseen, hurricane. Nothing was done to prepare for the disaster. In its aftermath, both Democrats and Republicans were utterly indifferent to the social suffering it caused, using it as a pretense for a massive military mobilization, the privatization of the city's schools and the permanent expulsion of many poor residents.

The Obama administration, brought into power amid sweeping opposition to the Bush administration's militarism and subservience to the financial elite, has only continued the wholesale plunder of social resources and their diversion into war and financial

speculation.

It is worth taking note that as bursting dams sent water surging into residential areas in South Carolina, an American AC-130 gunship, costing nearly \$200 million to build and countless millions more to operate, spent an hour destroying a Doctors Without Borders hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan. At the same time, US stock markets were soaring on the news that fewer jobs were created last month than had been anticipated, making it more likely that the US Federal Reserve will continue pumping free money into the financial system.

These events express certain basic characteristics of American society: when it comes to waging wars abroad, leading to the death and displacement of millions, or propping up the rapacious and speculative activities of the financial elite, there is no limit on the resources expended. When it comes to maintaining the social infrastructure on which the livelihoods of millions of people depend, there is supposedly no money.

The need for disaster preparedness has never been more urgent. Supposedly once-in-a-millennium events, such as the floods in South Carolina, are rapidly becoming once-a-decade or once-a-year events, as global weather patterns are increasingly disrupted by climate change.

Last month, researchers at Climate Interactive said that global temperatures would rise by six degrees by the turn of the century even if current environmental pledges are honored, a state of affairs that would render much of the globe uninhabitable. Yet the capitalist system, riven by national divisions and dominated by a financial elite devoted to profit and endless wealth accumulation, makes it impossible to prepare for, much less prevent, such a disastrous outcome.

Even the provision of drinking water and sanitation is becoming seemingly impossible in many areas of the United States. Last year, the city of Flint, Michigan, once a center of the US auto industry, disconnected itself from the Detroit water system to save money, drawing water instead from the polluted Flint River. As a result, the incidence of elevated lead levels in children's blood has doubled and local authorities have called on charities to provide bottled water to the city's population.

The crisis of drinking water is by no means unique to Flint. The Associated Press, in an exposé last month

entitled "Drinking water systems imperiled by failing infrastructure," reported that "at stake is the continued availability of clean, cheap drinking water—a public health achievement that has fueled the nation's growth for generations and that most Americans take for granted."

The provision of clean drinking water to urban areas—a science mastered by the Romans two millennia ago—along with the maintenance of bridges, levees, dams and roads, is increasingly becoming impossible in the world's "richest" and most powerful capitalist country. This is not for lack of money, technology, social resources or desire on the part of the population. Rather, it is a result of the domination of American society by a rapacious financial elite that subordinates everything to its drive to plunder society at home and the whole world abroad.

There is no solution to the vast and sweeping crisis confronting American society while this parasitic financial elite maintains its grip over social life. Its political stranglehold must be broken and its wealth expropriated. This requires the building of a mass movement of the working class, armed with a socialist perspective of reorganizing society on the basis of social need, not private profit.



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