

Social roots of the West Virginia floods

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The death toll in West Virginia has risen to 26 as damage is assessed in areas cut off by last week's historic flood. Several rivers broke records set more than a century ago, cresting 10 to 15 feet above flood stage. It will likely take several days to take full stock of the destruction, since some of the more remote towns in mountainous areas continue to lack power and road access. More damaging rains are also threatened.

As the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for the West Virginia House of Delegates in District 16, I call for a multibillion-dollar program to make flood victims whole, rebuild their homes and communities and construct an infrastructure that will protect residents against such devastating flooding.

The waters roared into communities with a terrifying swiftness, and the aftermath has been described as looking like "a war zone." Several people remain missing. Bridges and roads were ripped up, houses have been washed away, and the largely impoverished population has been left with nothing. Residents in White Sulphur Springs, one of the worst hit towns, said the water rushed in like ocean waves, and many were left stranded on their rooftops. Many rescuers have worked heroically around the clock, endangering their own lives to help others.

Disasters like floods are invariably treated by the media and politicians as "acts of God." However, definite human factors are always involved. Most directly, long-term deforestation and strip mining are well known to create problems with mountain runoff and stream damage. Mud- and rockslides are common occurrences in the region even after ordinary rains.

Floods are not inexplicable tragedies, let alone inevitable ones. In the 1972 Buffalo Creek Disaster, 125 residents of Logan County, West Virginia were killed and 4,000 left homeless when a coal slurry dam owned by Pittston Coal burst four days after a federal inspector had declared it safe. Despite flagrant

violations of state and federal environmental safety laws, the coal bosses were hit with nothing more than a wrist-slap punishment.

Such disasters, which the big business politicians said would never happen again, continue to occur. Many of the worst affected areas after last week's storms have been logged and the hillsides are riddled with mines. After generations of workers have produced vast fortunes for the capitalists, their communities have been left environmentally ruined and vulnerable to the elements.

Physical infrastructure and environmental reclamation are starved of funds at the state and federal level alike. Civil engineering and environmental organizations have warned for decades that catastrophic flooding would occur without dam upgrades, better flood mitigation systems, and regulations on the blockage of streams with mining debris. Often such recommendations are dismissed as financially unfeasible and inconvenient for companies.

The US Army Corps of Engineers has warned that the dam on Bluestone Lake, for example, would be unable to withstand the "probable maximum flood" level it was originally built to hold. A dam failure at this site would result in the destruction of the state capital Charleston and other cities, a flood in the Ohio River, and the poisoning of the fresh water supply by West Virginia's vast and poorly regulated chemical industry. Millions of people are potentially one torrential rainfall away from catastrophe.

As in the case of Hurricane Katrina and the lead contamination of Flint, Michigan, the flooding in West Virginia reveals the real class relations of American society. Scenes in the local news expose the terrible poverty and inequality that exist in this country. It is clear that every "natural disaster" contains within it a social disaster.

One might ask: What would have been the response

of the ruling establishment if dozens of people had been killed in a bombing or mass murder? The immense resources devoted to “homeland security” and the “war on terror” are not mobilized to protect the lives of the population from natural or manmade disasters.

Those funds have been siphoned from basic infrastructure over the past decade-and-a-half, undermining living conditions and public health. Police departments have billions of dollars in military-grade weapons and the capacity to lock down entire cities, yet the emergency response capacity for flooding remains at the level of volunteer rescue squads, working 24-hour shifts without basic supplies.

Working people have donated food and water and joined in aid distribution and cleanup efforts. The outpouring of support expresses the generosity and fundamental unity of the working class.

By contrast, the political establishment and business owners pay lip service to grief while gripping their wallets. The outlook of the capitalists running West Virginia is best epitomized in the response of Jim Justice, the Democratic Party gubernatorial candidate, who in one breath expressed concern over the lives of residents of White Sulphur Springs, and in the next worried over the condition of the grass on his luxury golf course ahead of the PGA tour.

Justice, the billionaire coal baron put forward by the Democratic Party establishment and endorsed by the United Mine Workers and other trade unions, is an enemy of the working class no less than the reviled Republican presidential nominee, Donald Trump.

For the rich, the flooding in West Virginia is one more fly-over tragedy that will be forgotten with the next news cycle. The Obama administration will issue its perfunctory statement of sympathy, open a hotline for minimal aid and leave thousands of people to fend for themselves.

The working class must organize its own response with a political program that addresses its own interests based upon socialist planning and equality. The Socialist Equality Party calls for rational, scientific planning on an international scale.

The giant coal and energy companies and major banks valued at \$10 billion and over must be expropriated and run as public utilities, under the collective ownership and democratic control of the working class, and their ill-gotten gains restored to the

public to meet social needs. The military-intelligence apparatus must be dismantled and the trillions of dollars squandered on war invested in improving living conditions.

Infrastructure such as dams, bridges and roads must be rebuilt to a high degree of safety. Water systems must be restored and the natural environment protected in areas prone to flooding. Housing must be rebuilt with higher standards. Industry, including chemical production and lumber and coal extraction, must be run rationally and safely, as part of a socialist planned economy.

Workers and young people must draw political lessons from the flood and its aftermath. What is required is an independent political movement of the working class to fight for its interests. This is the Socialist Equality Party.

It is on this basis that the SEP is running its candidates, Jerry White for president and Niles Niemuth for vice president, in the US presidential election. In West Virginia’s District 16 House of Delegates race, I am fighting to put forward a program for workers and youth. I urge readers to support the SEP campaigns and get involved today to build an independent, socialist movement of the working class.



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