

The West Virginia floods and America's class divide

Jerry White
29 June 2016

Residents of West Virginia are facing an immense cleanup and reconstruction effort in the aftermath of the flash floods that killed at least 23 people and destroyed or damaged thousands of homes, bridges and roads. As of Tuesday, hundreds were living in emergency shelters, 7,000 remained without power, and health officials were warning of the dangers of contaminated well water and disease-carrying mosquitoes.

As in previous disasters, the declaration of a state of emergency by President Obama will provide minimal aid, and those trying to reconstruct their lives will face bureaucratic indifference from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and challenges by private insurers to their claims.

The immediate trigger for the flood was record-setting rainfall, called a “nearly one in a thousand-year event” by the National Weather Service. However, like all natural disasters, the extent of the damage and its human impact were determined by social and political conditions that are man-made.

The victims of such disasters are predominantly working-class and poor people living in the most vulnerable homes and communities. West Virginia is the second poorest state in the United States, trailing only Mississippi. After extracting vast fortunes from the labor of generations of miners, the giant energy corporations and coal bosses have left West Virginia in a state of economic, social and environmental ruin.

King Coal has long dominated the state’s political structure, through both Democratic and Republican politicians. Successive governors have showered tax cuts on the coal companies and looked the other way as they flagrantly violated environmental and job safety regulations. Just last month, the state legislature voted to slash millions from the budget, including a two percent across-the-board cut in already underfunded

environmental protection programs.

After the 1972 Buffalo Creek Disaster, which killed 125 men, women and children, civil engineers and environmental organizations warned that deforestation from strip-mining and commercial logging operations made mountainsides and the communities in the hollows below them far more susceptible to deadly mudslides and flooding. These warnings have long been ignored, and many of the counties hardest hit by last week’s flooding were heavily mined and logged.

It is now nearly 11 years since Hurricane Katrina, the costliest natural disaster in US history. The hurricane, and the breaching of the levees protecting New Orleans, destroyed working-class and poor neighborhoods and killed nearly 2,000 people in Louisiana, Mississippi and other states. The disaster exposed the criminal level of neglect of basic infrastructure, at the time overseen by the Bush administration, and the desperate poverty facing millions of Americans.

The social conditions revealed by the West Virginia floods are no less horrendous than those in New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward, where so many perished. Were it not for a less dense population, the loss of life in the flood-struck areas of West Virginia could have been just as great as in New Orleans.

The flooding in West Virginia has once again revealed the basic reality of life in the United States: the immense social gulf separating the working class—of all races and ethnicities—from the corporate and financial elite that controls the political system. These conditions have been immensely exacerbated since the financial crash of 2008, which coincided with the coming to power of President Barack Obama.

This class chasm, intensified by ever-widening social inequality, dominates the capitalist system

internationally. According to the World Wealth Report 2016 just issued by the consulting firm Capgemini, the number of High Net Worth Individuals (HNWI) in North America (those with liquid assets of \$1 million or more) “grew by 8.3 percent to 4.68 million and their wealth by 9.1 percent to US\$16.2 trillion, driven largely by strong equity market performance.” The net worth of these individuals would cover five times the amount the American Civil Engineers Association says the US needs to spend by 2020 to rebuild America’s decaying dams, levees, schools and other critical infrastructure.

In West Virginia, some 11,000 miners have lost their jobs since 2013. In many abandoned mining towns, half to three-quarters of the male population is jobless. Similar conditions prevail throughout the country. Meanwhile, Obama continues to declare that life in America is “pretty darn great” and workers have nothing to complain about.

The social anger over these conditions is beginning to take a political form. In last month’s West Virginia primary, Bernie Sanders, who describes himself as a socialist and who focused his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination on social inequality and denunciations of the “billionaire class,” defeated Hillary Clinton by a margin of 51.4 to 35.8 percent. Sanders secured far higher margins in the poorer counties and among young people who are looking for an anti-capitalist alternative to both big-business parties.

This political radicalization flies in the face of the official presentation of the “white working class” by the *New York Times* and other media mouthpieces of the Democratic Party, which slandered West Virginia workers as “racist” after Donald Trump’s victory in the state’s Republican primary.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained at the time, if sections of miners and others were susceptible to the demagoguery of the billionaire real estate mogul, it was because their struggles had over decades been betrayed by the United Mine Workers (UMWA) and because they were deeply alienated from the Democratic Party, which combines ruthless attacks on their jobs and living standards with racial and gender politics and denunciations of supposed “white privilege.”

Now that Sanders has effectively ended his campaign and is moving to back Clinton, the *Times* & Co. are

stepping up their campaign to castigate white workers, insist that all issues must be considered from the standpoint of race and gender, and bury the issue of social inequality and the fundamental class questions. They do so even as they promote a right-wing, militaristic Democratic candidate who personifies the corrupt relationship between the political establishment and Wall Street.

West Virginia has a rich history dating from its inception in the rebellion of poor farmers against the slaveholders in Virginia and extending to the semi-insurrectionary Mine Wars of the 1920s and 1930s and the mass miners’ strikes of the 1960s and 1970s. The latter culminated in the 111-day strike of 1977-78, when miners defied the back-to-work order by Democratic President Jimmy Carter. But the miners have long been politically disenfranchised by the UMWA’s subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party. The anti-working-class character of the UMWA is summed up by its current support for the gubernatorial campaign of Democrat Jim Justice, a coal baron and the state’s richest man, worth \$1.6 billion.

Over the last seven-and-a-half years, President Obama has poured trillions of dollars into bank bailouts, endless wars, and domestic security programs to spy on the American people and arm the police with military-grade weaponry for the purpose of suppressing social discontent. As a result, the American people have never been so economically and socially insecure and vulnerable to disasters like the floods in West Virginia.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact