

The Louisiana flooding—a failure of American capitalism

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The widespread flooding in southern Louisiana, the byproduct of unprecedented rainstorms over the weekend, is a demonstration that American society is no more prepared for a significant natural disaster in 2016 than it was 11 years ago this month, when Hurricane Katrina made landfall in roughly the same area.

So far, 11 people are reported to have been killed and many thousands rendered homeless. As the Associated Press noted, “a catastrophic 48-hour torrent of rain ... sent thousands of people in Louisiana scrambling for safety and left many wondering how a region accustomed to hurricanes could get caught off guard so badly.”

The flooding in the Louisiana is the latest in a long series of similar disasters to strike what is supposedly the richest country in the world. As always, the impact of natural phenomena—whether it is hurricanes, floods, tornados, hurricanes or earthquakes—reveals the stark reality of social life. Millions of people, living day to day and paycheck to paycheck, do not have the resources to deal with the financial shock caused by such events. Politicians make hollow promises and empty gestures. The media shines a brief light on people who are generally neglected and ignored. And after the immediate cause subsides, those who have been devastated are left to fend for themselves, while nothing is done to prepare for the next disaster.

While thousands of state residents, including many from New Orleans and other cities not directly affected by the flooding, flocked to the disaster zone to volunteer their services in rescuing and caring for victims, the governmental response was completely inadequate.

The Louisiana state government and the local parish (county) governments were overwhelmed by extent of

the emergency and the widespread social need. At least 40,000 homes have been damaged, most of them significantly. Some 30,000 people had to be rescued, many from their vehicles as they sought to flee the flood zone.

In contrast to hurricanes, where shelters are opened in advance, there were few such facilities prepared for the impact of an unnamed low-pressure system that caused record rainfalls of up to 22 inches. By Tuesday, however, more than 11,000 people were jammed into the shelters that were hastily made available by local authorities.

State government offices were closed Monday in at least 27 parishes, nearly half of the state, and even the governor’s mansion in Baton Rouge had to be evacuated temporarily as water began to enter the basement, the state government’s emergency headquarters. Tens of thousands of state residents are without electric power, and repair efforts were hampered by roads blocked by water.

The area hit by the flooding is largely rural, with some suburban and exurban development outside Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Louisiana is one of the poorest US states, and has been devastated by budget cuts under both Democratic and Republican state administrations. Roads and bridges are in poor repair—as evidenced by the large number of motorists trapped by flood waters—and emergency services, other than the National Guard, part of the US military, are badly underfunded.

The Obama administration has done little more than the Bush administration after Katrina. There were no plans for Obama to interrupt his vacation on Martha’s Vineyard, although he will leave the island briefly to campaign for Hillary Clinton. He made the obligatory declaration of a federal disaster area, covering four

parishes on Monday, expanded to 12 parishes on Tuesday. Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards, a Democrat, said that the declaration would eventually apply to about 30 parishes, half the state.

Only a relative handful of the residents of the affected area have federal flood insurance—far fewer proportionally than in New Orleans, 10 percent compared to 40 percent. Most of the flood victims will be wiped out, with their homes and property deluged, forced to rebuild from scratch at their own expense. Once again, as during Katrina, working people are being left to their own devices, with no real social safety net to support them.

The Obama administration mobilized trillions in resources when the financial aristocracy faced disaster on Wall Street in 2009. It spends lavishly on the military-intelligence apparatus, nearly a trillion dollars every year. But aid for the flood victims in Louisiana will be doled out stingily, just as it has been for those hit by flooding in West Virginia, Maryland and Texas, or by other weather events such as tornadoes, drought and mudslides.

The pathetic federal response also exposes the fraudulent character of the “war on terror,” now approaching the 15th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. Vast resources have been squandered on “counterterrorism,” the build-up of the forces of the state and emergency planning. But when a genuine emergency hits—one, moreover, that was fully predictable—the enormous state apparatus yawns and turns its back.

There is an additional element in the latest natural disaster. More than any previous such event, it is linked directly to climate change. A report on the *New York Times* web site Tuesday noted that the weekend downpour in Louisiana was the eighth event in the past 15 months that exceeded scientific predictions of events occurring only once every 500 years, or with a 0.2 percent probability.

Dr. David Easterling, an official of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration who spoke with the *Times*, said reports that as much as 31 inches of rain have fallen on parts of Louisiana in the past week were “pretty staggering,” the type of event that would occur only once every 1,000 years. The article continued, “Dr. Easterling said that those sorts of estimates were predicated on the idea that the climate

was stable, a principle that has become outdated.”

July was the warmest month ever recorded, following a June that was the warmest June on record. The higher the air temperature, the greater the capacity of the air to store water vapor, and the greater potential downpour in the event that water vapor turns into rain.

How would a society based on rational planning and social need, rather than private profit, respond to such a crisis?

The resources of the society, including manpower, skilled emergency responders and basic necessities like shelter, clothing and food, would be fully mobilized and available in vast quantities as soon as required. Advance planning would ensure that regions particularly susceptible to such disasters, like the low-lying, swampy terrain of southern Louisiana, would receive special attention. And every effort would be made to adapt the technological processes of society to the scientific understanding of the driving forces of climate change, by reducing fossil fuel use and other emissions contributing to global warming.

Such a response would be the mirror opposite of the chaotic, unplanned and thoroughly indifferent response of American capitalist society to the latest natural disaster. It would only be possible under a socialist, planned economy controlled democratically by the working class.



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