

Government indifference in the midst of historic Louisiana flooding

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As floodwaters continue to recede, the historic scale of the destruction in south Louisiana is becoming more apparent. The Red Cross calls the floods, caused by unprecedented rainfalls which began last weekend, the worst US natural disaster since Hurricane Sandy in 2012, which devastated much of the East Coast.

The figures for the humanitarian crisis are being constantly revised upward. At least 13 people have been killed and 40,000 homes damaged, many beyond repair. Some 30,000 people have had to be rescued from the rising waters, either trapped in their homes or stranded in their cars on the highway while trying to evacuate. More than 7,000 people remain in emergency shelters, set up at the last minute by government agencies.

A broad area encompassing 20 of the state's 64 parishes (counties) has been declared a disaster area by the federal government, spanning from the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain, considered part of the New Orleans metropolitan area, westward towards Lake Charles, near the border with Texas. Many places are still flooded, almost a full week after the initial rainstorms.

Entire parishes have been almost wiped out by the floods. A spokeswoman for the Livingston Parish Sheriff's office estimated that three quarters of the parish's homes were a "total loss." Livingston Parish, comprising eastern suburbs of Baton Rouge, the state capital and second largest city in the state, is home to 138,000 people. More than 15,000 people were rescued in this one parish alone, which received more than 31 inches of rain in 15 hours on Friday. In nearby Ascension Parish, to the south of Baton Rouge, which is home to 114,000 people, more than 30 percent of the homes in the parish were flooded.

While the worst of the flooding has passed in most

areas, the situation is far from over. With yet more rain in the forecast for the area over the weekend, many areas where water levels had been subsiding are faced with the prospect of renewed flooding. "The problem is there is nowhere for the water to run off" in the flat terrain of south Louisiana, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service told NBC News. "In the last couple of days, we've had to reissue flash flood warnings in areas that had been showing improvement."

The federal response to the disaster is a mixture of stinginess and outright indifference.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) caps its financial assistance to flood victims, according to previously set guidelines, at a paltry \$33,000 per family, far less than the costs faced by those whose homes were wiped out. However, most victims will likely see only a tiny fraction of even this inadequate sum; the average payout in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which killed more than 1,000 people and flooded 80 percent of the city of New Orleans, was a paltry \$7,114, according to figures published by the *Advocate* newspaper.

This is all the more significant because the vast majority of the flood victims have no flood insurance, meaning they will be compelled to rely entirely on their own savings, if they have any, and upon government aid to rebuild their lives. Many areas affected by flooding lie outside of federally designated flood zones, where residents assumed that they would not need flood insurance. However, less than half of homeowners in even high-risk areas throughout the state lack flood insurance, according to FEMA.

Summing up official indifference to the plight of people whose lives have been destroyed by the floods, FEMA spokeswoman Robin Smith told the *Wall Street*

Journal, “we’re like a life vest, not a lifeboat,” and told the newspaper that victims must look to private nonprofit groups, not the federal agency charged with responding to natural disasters, to be made whole. Some 86,000 people have already applied for help from FEMA, which has approved payouts of only \$3.7 million so far, the paper noted.

The miserly aid to flood victims contrasts sharply with the virtually unlimited sums of money laid out by the federal government for the military. The *Journal* estimated that the total property damage from the floods could surpass \$1 billion. By comparison, the Obama administration spent \$80 billion to bail out General Motors and Chrysler. The net cost of the bailout of the auto bosses, \$9 billion, is four times the total in disaster grants awarded by FEMA.

The \$33,000 maximum FEMA grant “is not even going to cover repairs to the structure, not to mention the entire contents of the house stacked up by the street soaking wet,” Gene Broussard, whose brother was killed in the floods, told the *Wall Street Journal*. “The government bails out a company or another country, and you’ve got a good section of the state of Louisiana in total loss, and you’re going to offer us \$33,000 to fix up our home and replace everything?”

To make matters worse, the destruction of much of the area’s housing stock by the floods will render essentially moot FEMA’s principal form of financial aid to homeowners, temporary rental assistance designed to provide some form of housing while their homes are rebuilt. The flooding of more than 40,000 homes will likely produce the most severe housing crisis in the state since Hurricane Katrina, which forced hundreds of thousands to seek shelter in hotels or shoddily built “FEMA trailers,” or to leave the state altogether in search of housing. FEMA “can’t rely on [rental assistance],” National Public Radio noted, because “there simply aren’t habitable homes available for rent.”

The political establishment has responded to the disaster with cold indifference. Hillary Clinton announced on Facebook that she would not be traveling to Louisiana, using the lame excuse that relief efforts couldn’t “afford any distractions” created by such a visit. Her Republican opponent Donald Trump made a photo-op appearance for a few hours in the Baton Rouge area on Friday afternoon before boarding a plane

for a rally in Michigan.

But the most callous response so far has come from President Barack Obama, who has refused calls to end his two-week vacation on Martha’s Vineyard early to travel to Louisiana. Only on Friday afternoon did the administration finally announce that Obama would visit the state next Tuesday, after he ends his vacation and returns to the White House Sunday night.

While large portions of Louisiana remained under water, Obama spent his days “letting loose, staying out til 1 at night with friends and hitting the golf course by day at the beautiful island destination,” *Time* magazine reported, adding that vacation cottages in the area carry a rental charge from \$2,900 to \$20,000 a week. Obama did, however, take an afternoon off from his vacation to attend a fundraiser for Hillary Clinton, also held in Martha’s Vineyard, where a well-heeled group of 60 people paid \$10,000 to \$33,400 apiece.

Obama’s decision recalls the actions of George W. Bush during Hurricane Katrina. Bush initially refused to cut short his vacation at his ranch in Texas, later engaging in the infamous “fly-over” of Air Force One over New Orleans on his way back to Washington DC.

The comparison was not lost on the local media in Louisiana, where the Baton Rouge-based *Advocate*, concerned by the poor “optics” of this repeat performance, wrote an editorial criticizing Obama for passing his time in “a playground for the posh and well-connected,” while “Louisiana residents [languish] in flood waters.”

Obama’s evident indifference to the plight of the people of southern Louisiana is itself a political statement. It demonstrates that the response to Katrina was not motivated merely by Bush’s personal callousness or racism, but was rather an expression of the class position of the entire capitalist political establishment towards the devastating social conditions facing working people.



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