Haiti’s hurricane devastation: A tragedy rooted in capitalist oppression

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One week after Hurricane Matthew struck the southern coast of Haiti, the full dimensions of the devastation inflicted on the people of this impoverished Caribbean nation are only beginning to emerge.

The unofficial death toll has risen well past 1,000. Tens of thousands are injured and unable to receive medical aid, with hospitals and clinics badly damaged and lacking basic supplies such as painkillers and antibiotics, not to mention power and clean water. The United Nations estimates that 2.1 million Haitians--more than 20 percent of the country’s population--have been affected by the storm, with 1.4 million in urgent need of humanitarian assistance.

What is still to come will almost certainly be worse. The crops of Haiti’s southern coast have been wiped out and there are warnings of famine. Cholera cases are again on the rise. The disease has already claimed the lives of over 10,000 Haitians after being introduced into the country by United Nations “peace-keeping” troops.

The immense suffering from Hurricane Matthew comes less than seven years after the 2010 earthquake, which killed 230,000 people, injured 300,000 more, and left over 1.5 million people homeless. As we wrote at the time, the people of Haiti were “…victims not merely of a natural catastrophe. The lack of infrastructure, the poor quality of construction in Port-au-Prince and the impotence of the Haitian government to organize any response are determining factors in this tragedy.

“These social conditions are the product of a protracted relationship between Haiti and the United States, which, ever since US Marines occupied the island nation for nearly 20 years beginning in 1915, has treated the country as a de facto colonial protectorate.”

This bitter legacy of imperialist oppression remains the essential factor in the horrific impact of natural disasters like Hurricane Matthew.

In the wake of the 2010 earthquake, international donors pledged $10.4 billion for Haiti, including $3.9 billion from the US. The chief figure overseeing this relief effort was Bill Clinton, whose previous “gift” to the people of Haiti was a trade deal that eliminated tariffs on rice imports from the US subsidized by the American government, bankrupting Haiti’s own rice producers and leaving the country unable to feed itself.

Welcoming the earthquake’s death and destruction as a golden opportunity for further capitalist profit-making, the former Democratic president vowed that the aid money would allow Haiti to “build back better.” Nearly seven years later, the universal question asked by Haitians is “what happened to the money?”

Today, just as in 2010, Haiti remains the poorest and most socially unequal country in the Western Hemisphere. While the masses of Haiti remain mired in poverty, the former US president and his wife Hillary, the 2016 Democratic presidential candidate, have seen their own wealth soar, raking in an estimated $230 million in income since Bill Clinton left the White House.

The couple parlayed lives supposedly spent in “public service” into admission into the upper stratosphere of American wealth, with incomes in the top 0.1 percent bracket. The source of this vast wealth was a political machine that might well be dubbed “Clinton, Inc.” This consists essentially of a seedy money-laundering operation to ensure big business support for the Clintons’ political ambitions as well as their personal fortunes. The basic components of the operation are lavishly paid speeches to Wall Street and Fortune 500 audiences, corporate campaign contributions, and donations to the ostensibly philanthropic Clinton

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Foundation.

It was the foundation that played a prominent role in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. Its most visible legacy is a low-wage garment factory run by a South Korean company known for its use of violence and intimidation to subdue its workers, alongside a pair of luxury hotels catering to businessmen seeking opportunities to extract profit from the oppression of the super-exploited Haitian working class.

In an investigation of the foundation's activities in Haiti, ABC News wrote that the garment factory "has under-delivered on projected jobs." It continued: "Haitian workers have accused managers of bullying and sexual harassment. And…after opening its factory in the Haitian industrial park--built with $400 million in global aid--the Korean firm became a Clinton Foundation donor and its owner invested in a startup company owned by Hillary Clinton's former chief of staff."

The report made clear that the relief operation did more for the "Friends of Bill" than for the Haitian masses, and that those who coughed up donations to the Clinton Foundation were rewarded with opportunities to mount profitable ventures in Haiti.

In addition to Hillary Clinton's former chief of staff at the State Department, the Democratic candidate's younger brother, Tony Rodham, also cashed in on the Clinton connection in Haiti, including through his position on the advisory board of a US company that in 2012 secured the first gold mining permit issued in the country in half a century. The Haitian Senate subsequently put a hold on the controversial permit.

The Clinton Foundation is emblematic of the role played by imperialist "humanitarianism." In Haiti, it serves as an instrument for shoring up Washington's semi-colonial domination under conditions in which US imperialist hegemony is being challenged by the growth of Chinese trade and investment elsewhere in the hemisphere. In Syria, it provides the pretext for a proxy war that has killed hundreds of thousands of people.

The real relationship of the Clintons to Haiti was further exposed by the decision of the Department of Homeland Security Secretary to resume the deportation of Haitian refugees. While temporarily suspended because of the hurricane, the deportations are to begin as soon as possible. In the meantime, the refugees are being imprisoned in detention camps.

While the Obama administration claimed the action was warranted because of improved conditions in Haiti, it was driven by proof of the exact opposite, in the form of thousands of Haitian refugees arriving at the US-Mexican border. The decision was taken in large part out of fear that allowing them into the country could undermine Hillary Clinton's presidential bid.

Anger over the conditions in Haiti is growing. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon warned Monday, "Tensions are already mounting as people await help." Among the first moves of the UN has been to extend for six months the mandate of the UN Stabilization Mission (MINUSTAH), which deploys armed "peace-keepers" in Haiti. US Marines have also been deployed to the country and are reportedly operating with the Haitian National Police against "looters."

Overcoming the legacy of imperialist oppression in Haiti is possible only through the revolutionary struggle of the Haitian workers and oppressed, in unity with the workers in the United States and internationally, to put an end to the capitalist system.

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