

The Houston flood, the anarchy of the capitalist market and the case for socialist planning

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The disaster along the US Gulf Coast triggered by Hurricane Harvey continues to worsen as the storm moves east into Louisiana. Houston, the nation's fourth largest city, remains inundated by unprecedented levels of flooding. The reported death toll is 30 and rising, amid reports of dozens of residents gone missing. Five days after landfall, it is still not known how many people are in need of rescue.

Even as the level of death and destruction in southeast Texas mounts, there is a concerted effort to deny that anything could have been done to prepare for or limit the impact of the storm.

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Administrator William "Brock" Long proclaimed that the disaster was impossible to foresee. "You could not forecast this up. You could not dream this forecast up," Long said Monday night. Uncritically quoting Long, the *Washington Post* published a front-page article with the headline: "Rescue officials say there was no way to prepare for deluge's ferocity."

In its editorial on Tuesday, the *New York Times* wrote that rescue efforts were going "about as well as could be expected." It added that instead of "lamenting its failure to heed long-ago warnings," the country should "look ahead." Ominously, it suggested that, as in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, working class areas of Houston might be left to rot, declaring that officials will need to "make difficult decisions about whether to rebuild and how."

Twelve years after Katrina, nothing has been done to strengthen flood control systems and build up the social infrastructure to limit the impact of major storms. Nor has anything been done to plan and prepare emergency and public safety measures to deal with a severe

weather event. Repeated warnings and urgent recommendations, such as were contained in the American Society of Civil Engineers' 2014 report, "Call for a National Flood Risk Management Strategy," have gone entirely unheeded.

Robert Bea, an emeritus civil engineering professor at UC Berkeley and expert on hurricane risks on the Gulf Coast, told the *Los Angeles Times* that the official claim that Houston's flood control system could protect the population from a 100-year storm was a "100-year lie." The 100-year claim, he explained, is based on the city receiving a maximum of 13 inches of rain in 24 hours, something that has happened more than eight times in the last 27 years.

The reason why these warnings have been ignored is not hard to fathom. They have been resolutely opposed by corporate interests, including the real estate industry, Wall Street and Big Oil. Their ability, operating through bribed politicians of both parties, to veto and block elementary measures to protect the American people, exemplifies the complete subordination of all social needs under capitalism to the selfish drive of a corporate-financial oligarchy to accumulate ever greater levels of personal wealth and profit.

Texas, and the city of Houston in particular, have been hailed as exemplars of the "success" of completely deregulated, free market capitalism. The home of the Bush dynasty and a center of the oil and gas behemoths, Houston is the largest city in the country without any zoning laws to regulate urban development. There are no serious limits on real estate speculators and developers, who have systematically ignored warnings by engineers and scientists on the consequences of paving over wetlands and prairie

lands, which soak up heavy rains, with impermeable concrete.

The city's urban sprawl now covers some 600 square miles. Thousands of new homes have been built in flood plains since 2010. City planners know that Houston lies in a highly flood-prone region, but have done nothing to stop the destruction of the natural barriers that once limited flooding. The thousands of workers who have lost their livelihoods from Hurricane Harvey are the victims of the criminal negligence of government officials who do the bidding of avaricious property developers, oil magnates and bankers.

There was ample warning of a flood catastrophe. There was the near miss in 2008 with Hurricane Ike, which slammed into Galveston. Three rain storms since 2015 caused major flooding outside of areas deemed by FEMA to be at high risk. Longstanding discussions of extending and fortifying infrastructure to protect Houston and other coastal cities from storm surge have never gone beyond the planning stage. The city's antiquated and inadequate flood control infrastructure, built decades ago, has collapsed.

President Donald Trump's visit to Texas on Tuesday exemplified the callous indifference of the American ruling elite toward the plight of working class victims of its greed and neglect, along with an astonishing degree of ignorance as to what masses of people are thinking.

At a staged event at the crisis management center in Corpus Christi, Trump, Texas Governor Greg Abbott and FEMA Administrator Long congratulated one another on their marvelous response to the flood disaster. They presented the obscene spectacle of chaos and incompetence on the part of the authorities, which is evoking shock and outrage across the country and around the world, as a model of compassion and efficiency.

Abbott, a longtime political asset of the oil industry, slavishly praised Trump, the representative of the real estate interests that have ruthlessly plundered Houston and led it to its present fate.

Behind the scenes, discussions are already underway about how to take advantage of the crisis, as in post-Katrina New Orleans, to go even further in ripping up regulations, privatizing public assets and slashing wages.

It is critical that working people and youth begin to

draw the necessary political conclusions from this latest so-called "natural disaster." The catastrophe unfolding in Texas is not, after all, the first such event. The past 12 years alone have seen a succession of events that exposed the staggering levels of social inequality and poverty that pervade American society, along with the indifference and criminality of the ruling corporate oligarchy: Katrina in 2005, BP Oil in 2010, Superstorm Sandy in 2012, and now Houston.

All of these disasters are, in fact, social crimes. They demonstrate the incompatibility of modern complex societies with an outmoded and irrational economic system based on the anarchy of the capitalist market and the drive of financial oligarchs for more and more personal wealth. Thousands of people in Houston are losing everything, many their very lives, so that billionaire gangsters like Trump can buy bigger mansions and yachts and keep bribing the political hacks who defend their wealth and power.

These tragic events demonstrate in the negative the urgent need for the reorganization of economic and social life on the basis of rational planning, science, public ownership and control, and the democratic participation of the broad masses, both in the US and internationally.

The outpouring of solidarity and the organization of rescue efforts by ordinary people from Houston and around the country testify to the potential for the development of such a society. What stands in the way? It is the barbaric oligarchy that exerts a stranglehold on the wealth and productive forces of society. The chief lesson of Hurricane Harvey is that this obstacle must be removed from the scene of history. The only social force that can achieve this is the working class.



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