

“The working class has organized to save the working class”

A Hurricane Harvey diary: Part 2

Charles Abelard
4 September 2017

This is the second installment of my diary of Hurricane Harvey . I began these notes in the evening of Tuesday, August 29, 2017, after the hurricane moved off to the east and Houston skies began to clear. This installment covers August 31 through September 1.

* A little about me.

In case the reader is wondering who speaks, I lived in Houston for 39 years, from 1976 to 2015. Between jobs, including at NASA's Johnson Space Center, and living arrangements, I moved around the city quite a bit. I lived in the Galleria area, just outside Loop 610, the Interstate Highway loop that goes around the city (now the innermost of three such loops!), Briar Forest, the Fondren Southwest area, about a mile south of the notorious Braes Bayou, and the enclave city of West University. I now live 45 miles northwest of Houston.

I sold my house in 2015 and I'm glad I did. I don't know if that house flooded again this time, but I suspect it probably did. I would have had a fit watching that water come up and into the house once again! But in some places, notably Meyerland, the same houses have flooded three or four times in twenty years.

In all that time, water was a nearly inescapable hazard. Hurricanes, tropical storms, and just heavy, heavy rains, both in Houston and upriver from Houston, seemed like they were itching to pounce. For 39 years, I never got used to seeing the same spots flood over and over again. While living in Fondren Southwest, we never got flooded, but we saw Braes Bayou out of its banks once and close to overflowing several times. In West University, Braes got out of its banks again, and that time our house did flood out. It was only a matter of a few inches of water, but it disrupted our lives for the better part of a year, waiting on insurance payments and dickering with contractors.

* The storm has moved on. So has the media.

In the first installment I mentioned that I was watching local television coverage all throughout the hurricane. As the storm came towards, into, and over Texas, the coverage grew to 24 hours a day. After all, the storm itself was a

24-hour-a-day event. After what seemed an eternity, but was only four days, the storm moved off to the east, hitting Beaumont and Port Arthur pretty hard with heavy rainfall, and then heading approximately up the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. As the storm was downgraded over land and its rotating center began to lose its organization and come apart, the Houston area saw some nice sunshine and cool breezes, and the storm soon was no longer 24-hour news. Stories still occur, of course, now that the recovery phase has begun.

But for those who lost family members, homes, or livelihoods in the storm, the situation has not moved on very much. Many are living in temporary, makeshift, or just plain unsanitary conditions.

The one thing that is still getting repeat play is the multiplicity of fundraising efforts. Just this morning at my local Walgreen's drugstore, and several times yesterday at other stores, I was asked if I would like to contribute to the recovery effort.

* "Unforeseeable": Lessons learned. The same ones. Again.

One constant refrain we hear from all the authorities and their media acolytes: nobody could possibly have foreseen this disaster/tragedy.

Of course, this is just self-serving bourgeois nonsense. These people are great at publicly patting each other on the back for "solving" problems after the fact, but they seem to sense no need to solve them properly, before the fact. Of course, to provide a drainage system adequate to the now-demonstrated need for Houston, New Orleans and the rest of the Gulf Coast would cost billions of dollars. To pay for it might require postponing the nonstop bombing of poor, helpless little countries (that happen to be sitting on "our" oil) for a few years.

* Heartbreaking stories.

As this is a diary and not a news report, I will just recount the anguish that I, and surely millions of others, felt on hearing the sad stories that were coming out.

One such story concerned a woman who worked at the Omni Hotel. That's a fancy hotel on Woodway Avenue just

outside of Loop 610. The hotel has three elevators, one of which was inaccessible in the basement due to the floodwaters. The woman, who worked at the hotel, was reported missing. A search was conducted of the hotel and grounds (to the extent that it was possible to search under the conditions of an ongoing tropical storm), and she did not turn up at home. The search had included two elevators. Fears grew that perhaps the woman had gotten trapped in the third.

Another terrible story was that an entire family of six had been trying to escape by driving somewhere safe in their van. They were caught by the water. They—all six—drowned. The exact circumstances are not clear to me. I am not sure if they were swept away by rushing water, or if perhaps they drove into a flooded ditch they couldn't see.

* Timely intervention from a certain quarter in West Texas.

Harvey's impact seems to have been ameliorated a bit by a dry West Texas air mass, which got pulled into the vortex and quenched at least some of the rain that would otherwise have fallen. It was most interesting to watch this process, which modern science makes visible for the first time in human history. Two sets of spatial/temporal data were collected and superimposed on a map of Texas. One set was the usual radar images of the falling water of the storm, playing out over time. The other set was the atmospheric water vapor content (i. e. the humidity) as measured by satellite.

The water vapor map, like the rainfall, was color-coded. At the low end of the humidity scale the map of the air mass was colored a light shade of tan, almost the color of sand. This was dry air from west Texas, and it had gotten sucked into the hurricane's vortex while it was hovering close to Houston. One could almost see in real time the quenching effect of the dry air.

* The Cajun Navy.

I alluded earlier to the spontaneous self-organization of the working class into rescue details. It was everywhere evident, even to the most jaded of the media. Of course, the term "working class" was not used much, if at all, but the reality is the working class organized to save itself from the hurricane and the flooding.

One of my own neighbors, someone I'm not acquainted with, drove out of this neighborhood (about 45 miles northwest of Houston) in his Jeep with a red canoe strapped to the top, right in the middle of the storm. I can only imagine that he was intending to join in some rescue team or other.

An interesting group calling themselves the "Cajun Navy" arrived from Louisiana to run a bunch of rescue boats—flat-bottomed, shallow-water boats for the most part,

including airboats (the kind with the airplane propeller in the back). They were described as a kind of "renegade" group that does not take orders from anyone but themselves, but in a matter of hours they were patrolling all over the worst-flooded areas of Houston, plucking people and pets out of harm's way. Now I don't know much about this group's history (or their politics), but it's clear that the working class, if nobody else, has learned mighty lessons from their life experiences, and is capable of miracles of action. Just think what life could be like if the working class actually exercised state power between hurricanes!

I understand that the Cajun Navy followed Harvey east as it moved away from Houston. Imagine! No borders, no bureaucracy, just action to save lives in danger.

* Some infrastructure issues.

This is probably not the place to set down all of the problems facing Houston and the Texas Gulf Coast, but I should mention that, as the center of the world oil and gas industry, there are some mighty polluted spots in this area, and they were all washed over with floodwaters. People had to walk, no, wade, hip- and chest-deep, in those polluted waters to get to safety.

The question, "How do we arrange matters so that rainwater falling on Houston can get as directly as possible to the Gulf of Mexico without causing damage and loss of life?" The question is never really, seriously asked, because the answers would be threatening to propertied class. Large-scale public works would be involved, tens of thousands of jobs would have to be provided, waterways would have to be enlarged and straightened, and kept clear of trees and brush, not just for a season, but forever. Impounding ponds, which are increasingly numerous with new construction, would need to be provided. Construction in flood plains, so very common here because Houston is so dominated by greedy real estate developers, must be forbidden once and for all.

In fact, there are serious questions about where people should and should not, or may and may not, live, if Houston is to be a place where people can live safely in the worsening climatic conditions.

But there's "no money" for any of that. There's plenty of money to give to the banks, and there's plenty of money to finance all the wars the ruling class's hard, tiny, coal-black hearts desire, but it's awfully funny how the money always seems to run out just when the working class needs something.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact