

New York's Ida disaster: A social crime in the center of world capitalism

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The record rainfall that overwhelmed much of the Northeastern United States this week has left at least 48 dead and millions more grappling with the fallout from the historic flooding.

The remnants of Hurricane Ida dropped more than 2 inches (5 cm) of rain on 60 million people throughout the region, with densely populated portions of New York and New Jersey recording up to 9 inches (23 cm) overnight. In New York City's Central Park, the storm gushed 3.15 inches (8 cm) of water in just one hour, blowing away the previous record set just 11 days earlier.

The massive flooding in New York City—the wealthiest city in the world and home to the world's highest concentration of billionaires—has revealed the deadly consequences of the systemic defunding of social infrastructure and the impoverishment of masses of workers.

While the storm's intensity was unprecedented, it was by no means unexpected. Scientists have warned for decades about the consequences of global climate change, including the inevitability of more intense tropical storms driven by warming oceans, which have absorbed 93 percent of excess heat associated with global warming. Hurricane Ida strengthened into a Category 4 storm in a matter of hours, fed by waters in the Gulf of Mexico that were 3–5 degrees Fahrenheit (1.7–2.8 degrees C) higher than the norm last century.

Along with the climatic impacts, scientists have also long sounded the alarm over the abysmal lack of preparedness. “Much of the infrastructure in the Northeast, including drainage and sewer systems, flood and storm protection assets, transportation systems, and power supply, is nearing the end of its planned life expectancy,” the US National Climate Assessment stated in its latest report in 2019. “Current water-related infrastructure in the United States is not designed for the projected wider variability of future climate conditions compared to those recorded in the last century.” The authors stressed that “significant new investments in infrastructure” are needed to protect life and property.

The flooding this week exposed the spectacular failure to act on these warnings. Roadways across the region were transformed into raging rivers, submerging cars and motorists alike. More than a dozen people died in vehicles in New Jersey.

One driver was found dead after being swept nearly two miles by floodwaters.

The entire public transportation network in New York City ground to a halt Wednesday evening, not as a preparatory measure to protect the public but out of necessity once the system ceased to be navigable. Subway lines functioned as sewers and waterfalls cascaded down onto subway platforms, stranding passengers for hours.

A combination of rainwater and sewage engulfed homes across several states. At one housing complex in Elizabeth, New Jersey, floodwaters killed four residents and left 600 homeless. In New York City, at least 11 drowned after being trapped in flooded basement apartments.

Alongside the devastating scenes in the Northeast, residents along the Gulf Coast, where Hurricane Ida first made landfall, remain in dire conditions. At least 16 have died in Louisiana and Mississippi. The victims include four nursing home residents, who were evacuated to a filthy warehouse lacking facilities for the more than 800 residents herded inside two days before the hurricane struck. Officials determined that three of the four deaths were related to the storm.

Other causes of death include not only injuries sustained during the storm but also electrocution and carbon monoxide poisoning. It was not until Thursday, four days after Ida struck, that New Orleans officials announced they were organizing a voluntary evacuation to allow elderly and disabled residents to seek shelter outside of the state. Hundreds of thousands of households remain without power, with service not expected to be restored until next week at the earliest.

The impact of the storm has put a spotlight on the horrific social reality in the United States, especially in the heart of global capitalism, New York City. While the wealthy were well protected in their insulated penthouses and multistory brownstones, the brutal housing conditions for the working class were tragically exposed by the storm. At least 11 died in illegal basement conversions in Queens. Many more have been made homeless.

Unable to afford the extortionate rents even in the outer boroughs of New York City, tens of thousands of mainly immigrant workers are forced to take up residence in hazardous basement apartments. Some are occupied by families. Others

are set up dormitory-style with a dozen or more beds rented out, sometimes in shifts. Barely habitable in the best of times, they become death traps under increasingly common flood conditions.

Just a handful of subway stops away from the center of global finance capital in Midtown Manhattan, the conditions for the “Other Half” in New York City resemble the depictions of the squalid and dangerous tenements on the Lower East Side that Jacob Riis exposed 130 years ago, long assumed to be in the distant past.

Hurricane Ida is not simply a tragic natural disaster. More fundamentally, it is a social crime. For decades, the ruling class has refused to provide funding for the maintenance of critical infrastructure, let alone building out infrastructure to handle forthcoming climate extremes. Nine years after Hurricane Sandy devastated the region, New York has not even completed all the needed repairs to the transit system. Much of the shoreline remains dangerously unprotected. Rather than mobilizing billions of dollars to provide adequate housing for the masses of workers, immense resources in the city have been squandered constructing luxury homes in the clouds for the wealthy.

Ida, which has devastated both the Gulf and Atlantic coasts, unfolds as wildfires are ravaging much of the West Coast. It comes on the heels of a relentless series of climate disasters around the world, including massive flooding in Germany, China and Tennessee, and unprecedented heat waves in the Pacific Northwest. A recent report from the World Meteorological Organization found that the number of climate-driven disasters has increased by a factor of five over the past 50 years, killing more than 2 million and inflicting more than \$3.6 trillion in losses.

The worsening impacts of climate change on the working class are already regular features of life under conditions where global temperatures have risen 3.4 degrees F (1.1 degrees C) from pre-industrial levels. Another half a degree of warming is already inevitable due to the inertia of the climate system. Global capitalism is on a trajectory to blow past the meaningless commitments made by national governments to limit the increase to two degrees. The future of human civilization itself is at risk.

The policies of the ruling class are determined by its own social interests. Just over the past year, as millions have died from the pandemic and climate disaster after disaster has unfolded, trillions of dollars have been pumped into the markets to boost the financial oligarchy’s fortunes. In the past 12 months alone, the S&P 500 added more than \$10 trillion to its market capitalization.

Meanwhile, what has been done to address climate change? After every disaster, the political establishment declares a wake-up call and mouths empty pledges to change course. Yet the modern-day tenements of Queens and the decaying subway system remain deadly. The climate vulnerabilities are growing,

while the trillions needed to shore up infrastructure are instead floating into the coffers on Wall Street.

The refusal of the ruling class in New York City to invest in climate resiliency measures has been matched by the incapacity of the global ruling class to put in place any meaningful response to the crisis. The decades of attempts to construct an international regime to stop global warming, from the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 to the Paris Agreement in 2015, have failed miserably.

To effectively address the climate crisis, which at its core is an international issue, requires a level of planning and coordination impossible under a system divided into rival nation-states that subordinates every facet of social life to profit. It requires the mobilization of society’s resources to implement wholesale changes in the production of materials and generation of energy, rapidly transitioning to renewable power for industry, transportation and homes.

The class issues bound up with climate change are mirrored in compressed form in the pandemic. The horrific death tolls from COVID-19—officially more than 660,000 in the US and 4.5 million globally—have not triggered a rational response from the ruling class to pursue the eradication of the virus. Instead, billionaires in the US have feasted on death, growing \$1.2 trillion richer during the pandemic.

In his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Karl Marx wrote, “At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or—this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms—with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution.”

What has blocked a rational solution to both the pandemic and to climate change is 1) the private ownership of the means of production; and 2) the division of the world into nation-states. These are the “fetters” that are preventing the progressive development of humanity. Their elimination is the precondition for dealing with climate change and for opening up a path to an enormous technological and scientific development of human society in the interests of the vast majority, not the tiny few.



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