Texas flood disaster: A crime of capitalism

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The death toll from flash flooding in Texas continues to rise, now above 100, with many still missing and presumed drowned. Among the dead are at least 27 girls and staff attending a summer camp in Kerr County, with 10 children and one staff member still missing. Meanwhile, more heavy rains have moved into central Texas, posing renewed threats to the safety of the population.

As the grim work of search and recovery continues, mounting evidence makes clear that this is not a "natural" disaster, but a crime of capitalism—a social order in which every aspect of life, including the most basic safety precautions, is subordinated to profit and the interests of a corporate-financial oligarchy.

At every level of government—county, state and federal—the interests of big business and the strategic concerns of American imperialism have blocked any effort to protect the population from deadly storms and floods.

At the local level, officials in Kerr County, located 60 miles northwest of San Antonio, repeatedly rejected proposals to establish an early warning system for flash floods. This, despite the fact that the county lies in what has been dubbed "Flash Flood Alley" due to the frequent and sudden surges of water down rivers flowing from the Texas Hill Country toward the Gulf of Mexico.

As recently as January 2017, Kerr County applied for a grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to fund an early warning system, estimated to cost $980,000. Local officials refused to seek county taxpayer funding, citing the expense, and in one discussion joked that the flood protection plan would be "dead in the water" if FEMA did not approve it. The incoming Trump administration ultimately did not award the grant.

Under three-term Republican Governor Greg Abbott, the state of Texas has spent $11 billion over the past five years on "Operation Lone Star," a patently unconstitutional effort to usurp federal authority over immigration enforcement during the Biden administration. This has included constructing a permanent base for the Texas Military Department on the Rio Grande, busing tens of thousands of asylum seekers to cities like New York, Washington, Chicago, and Los Angeles, and building 85 miles of border wall.

Abbott and the Republican legislature have spent lavishly to persecute immigrants under the pretext of defending Texas from a supposed foreign "invasion," while pinching pennies when it comes to real threats to the population.

Earlier this year, the Texas House of Representatives passed HB-13 to establish a statewide emergency response plan, but the bill was shelved in the state Senate in April after right-wing legislators denounced its $500 million cost.

"This shouldn't be about anything other than the fact that it's a half a billion dollars," one Republican legislator said during a floor debate on April 1, according to the *Texas Tribune*. "This is probably one of the most simple votes we should be able to take today."

The measures proposed in HB-13 could not have been implemented in time to prevent the July 4 flood disaster. But the state government's failure to act was only one link in a decades-long chain of neglect of social infrastructure.

At the federal level, the Trump administration has sought to conceal its own culpability for the disaster, claiming that the cuts to the National Weather Service imposed by Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency did not hinder the agency from issuing timely warnings in the hours before the flash flood struck.

There is no doubt that National Weather Service personnel recognized the danger and did everything they could to sound the alarm. Trump is now hiding behind the dedication and self-sacrifice of the very workers he and Musk were denouncing as parasites and bureaucrats only months ago.

But the efforts of workers were severely hampered by budget cuts, which had forced the early retirement of the warning coordination meteorologist in the San Antonio

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office—whose primary role was to liaise with local disaster management agencies. At the time of the flood, the San Antonio office had six vacancies out of 26 positions, and the San Angelo office had four unfilled roles out of 23.

Trump has already forced out 20 percent of career employees at FEMA and announced plans to disband the agency after the 2025 hurricane season, turning its functions over to the states. He has denounced climate change as a Chinese-inspired “hoax” and waged war on virtually every federal agency tasked with addressing science, environmental degradation and public health.

Next month will mark 20 years since Hurricane Katrina tore through the Gulf of Mexico, devastating the coasts of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. The storm breached the levees of New Orleans, flooding the iconic city and claiming the lives of more than 2,000 people.

At the time, the WSWS condemned the criminal indifference of the Republican administration of George W. Bush and the fecklessness of the Democrats, who constituted his nominal opposition and controlled both the city government in New Orleans and the state government in Louisiana. We wrote:

> The decisive components of the present tragedy are social and political, not natural. The American ruling elite has for the past three decades been dismantling whatever forms of government regulation and social welfare had been instituted in the preceding period. The present catastrophe is the terrible product of this social and political retrogression.

The past two decades have been years of unrelenting counterrevolution. Under Bush, Obama, Trump, Biden, and now Trump again, the American ruling class has transferred staggering sums of wealth to the financial oligarchy. The net worth of US billionaires has ballooned from just over $1 trillion in 2005 to more than $6 trillion today. Over the same period, the US has spent more than $14 trillion on its military, building up a vast apparatus of violence and repression to wage war all over the world.

Democratic and Republican presidents have presided over disaster after disaster, each exposing the decay of social infrastructure. Bush oversaw massive California wildfires; Obama the Deepwater Horizon spill, Hurricane Sandy and the Joplin, Missouri tornado; Trump, Hurricane Maria, which killed thousands in Puerto Rico; and Biden, Hurricane Ida, catastrophic flooding in California, and Hurricane Helene, the deadliest storm on the US mainland since Katrina. In every case, the population was left to fend for itself and nothing was done to prevent the next catastrophe.

Moreover, despite growing warnings from scientists about the catastrophic consequences of climate change—including more frequent, intense, and deadly storms—nothing has been done to address the crisis. Just as with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed and disabled tens of millions, a rational and coordinated response is impossible within the framework of the capitalist nation-state system.

Now this process has reached a culmination. The Trump administration is scrapping what remains of the social infrastructure and funneling every available resource into the pockets of the ultra-wealthy. The tax and spending bill passed last week, slashing more than $1 trillion from health care, food assistance, and education to finance massive tax cuts for the rich, is only the latest example of a government at war with its own population.

No section of the political establishment has any answer to the crisis confronting working people. The response to disasters like the Texas floods must include massive investment in infrastructure, flood and storm warning systems, emergency preparedness, and a coordinated global campaign to halt and reverse climate change. This requires planning on a world scale, impossible so long as society remains subordinated to the private profit interests of billionaires and the national divisions of the capitalist system.

The Socialist Equality Party fights for the expropriation of the financial oligarchy and the transformation of the banks and major corporations into publicly owned utilities, democratically controlled by the working class. The drastic shift toward fascism in the ruling elite is a response to its growing fear of the mass radicalization of the working class. The task facing working people is to deepen their understanding of the social and historical roots of this crisis and to build the revolutionary leadership required to carry out the socialist transformation of society.

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