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Capitalism and the Houston flood catastrophe

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Nearly twelve years to the day after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city of New Orleans, Hurricane Harvey is wreaking havoc along the Texas Gulf Coast. Harvey has caused widespread flooding in Houston, the fourth largest city in the country, with 2.3 million people and a metropolitan area population of nearly 6.5 million.

Once again, a major storm has stripped away the pretense and revealed the brutal reality of American society, exposing pervasive poverty, staggering levels of inequality, and rampant official neglect and corruption. Scenes are unfolding of entire families trudging through waist-high water befouled with oil, sewage and chemicals; people young and old scrambling onto roofs in the desperate hope of being rescued from rapidly rising water; entire sections of the city cut off from shelter, food and clean water. The situation will only grow worse as the storm continues to drop record volumes of rain on the city and its environs.

In the richest country in the world, where trillions of dollars were made available to the banks in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash, widespread destruction and loss of life have become a common feature of the tornadoes, floods, hurricanes and other severe weather events that occur with increasing frequency. This is above all due to the decay of infrastructure and an acute social crisis that has left millions without the means to prepare for a natural disaster.

The victims, as always, are overwhelmingly working-class. Once again, scenes of human suffering amid official dysfunction are shattering the claims of the United States to be a land of prosperity and progress.

As in every such crisis, the spontaneous response of ordinary people is one of social solidarity. Victims of the storm are rushing to help their neighbors and thousands of people are pouring into the impacted area to assist in saving lives and providing food, shelter and medical care. This stands in the starkest contrast to the authorities, who did nothing to ward off the impact of a major flood or prepare to deal with its consequences.

This is despite the fact that Houston and southeast Texas have seen one flood disaster after another. The very existence of Houston as a major port city is due to the hurricane in 1900 that destroyed the nearby city of Galveston. Since the turn of the new century, Houston has been hit by tropical storm Allison in 2001, Hurricane Rita in 2005 and Hurricane Ike in 2008. Harvey is the third major flooding event in Houston in the past three years. Over the past forty years, Houston has had more floods than any other major city in the United States. Floods are the number one cause of deaths from natural events in Houston, known as the “bayou city.”

A center of the oil industry and home to the Bush family, Houston and the state of Texas are held up as models of unrestrained free market capitalism. Houston and other major Texas cities have seen substantial growth as major corporations relocated to take advantage of the state’s low corporate tax rates, minimal regulations and low-wage workforce, which includes millions of undocumented immigrants.

For decades, the city has allowed developers and real estate speculators to carry out uncontrolled expansion, replacing wetlands and prairie lands, which absorb water, with paved surfaces, increasing the flood risk to the city. National, state and local politicians have ignored the repeated warnings of scientists and experts that they were courting disaster.

Hurricane protection infrastructure has been neglected. After Hurricane Ike, experts proposed the construction of seawalls along the coast and the erection of a floodgate around the Houston Ship Channel. This project has yet to materialize. Its cost is estimated at \$6 billion to \$8 billion, a small fraction of the revenue of the US oil industry in a single year.

While the hurricane and flood may be acts of nature, the scale of their impact has been magnified by man-made factors. Indeed, even the weather events are profoundly affected by economic and social conditions. There is no question that global warming, the result of the anarchic, irrational and profit-driven nature of capitalism, is responsible for the increasing frequency and severity of storms and floods in the US and around the world.

As far as the American ruling class is concerned, the main assets to be protected are the oil refineries in the Houston area, not the city’s working-class residents. Appearing on the “Fox News Sunday” program, Secretary of State and multimillionaire former ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson offered reassurances to the financial elite that its investments were safe, declaring that the oil and gas industry was “probably among the most prepared for these types of events.”

The *Wall Street Journal* published an article on Sunday, as the floodwaters were rising in Houston, bearing the headline “Hurricane Harvey Unlikely to Damage Insurers’ Balance Sheets.”

Houston exemplifies the colossal levels of social inequality in America. Thirteen of the world’s roughly 1,600 billionaires live in the city, which has an official poverty rate of 25 percent and a child poverty rate of 38 percent. A recent study by the Pew Research Center found that Houston is the most economically segregated city in the United States, with the rich geographically isolated from the poor.

Many who were stranded by Harvey’s floodwaters have told reporters that they simply lacked the money to evacuate.

As after Hurricane Katrina, the BP oil spill of 2010 and dozens of floods in Houston and across the country, nothing will be done to make the victims of the disaster whole. More than a decade after Hurricane Katrina, tens of thousands of former residents have still not been able to return home, and whole neighborhoods in New Orleans remain depopulated wastelands. Moreover, the events in Houston come as the Trump administration proposes to carry out hundreds of millions of dollars in cuts to FEMA in the fiscal year 2018 budget, including sharp reductions to projects associated with the Federal Flood Insurance Program.

The spontaneous demonstration of solidarity, compassion and energy on the part of working people in response to the Houston flood disaster shows in embryo the immense potential for the development of a truly humane and rational society that serves the needs of the people. What stands in the way are the outmoded social relations of capitalism, which enable a tiny elite to monopolize wealth and resources and plunder society to amass ever greater personal fortunes.

What is required is the mobilization of the working class to put an end to the capitalist system and to establish socialism, based on common ownership and control of the productive forces and the principle of social equality.