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The Texas catastrophe and the case for socialism

A disaster of colossal dimensions continues to unfold in the US state of Texas. More than 14 million people are still without clean water—that is, more people than the populations of entire countries such as Portugal and Belgium.

The collapse of the electrical infrastructure aggravated what would already have been a significant hardship for many Texans. Given the usually arid and humid subtropical climate, many Texans lack adequate cold weather clothing, such as warm coats and boots suitable for the snow that blanketed vast areas of the state over the past week-and-a-half, with temperatures only now beginning to warm.

With pipes frozen and power flickering out, countless horrific stories surfaced from across the state. Families listened in the dark as raw sewage backed up into bathtubs and out of toilets. Burst water mains flooded homes and destroyed priceless family photo albums and heirlooms. Icicles dangled from ceiling lights.



Jose Blanco, right, fills a cooler with water from a park spigot as others wait in line in Houston. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)

Long lines formed outside grocery stores where the shelves had already been stripped bare. Gas stations ran out of gas. Dialysis patients missed their appointments. Calls for emergency

assistance went unanswered. Hospital workers struggled to unload patients in parking lots choked with snow.

Many residents fled to hotels to escape the freezing temperatures in their homes, only to wake up to blaring alarms as their hotel's water mains burst. The residences, roads, bridges, schools, and workplaces were simply not built for freezing weather.

This catastrophe hit a population that was already reeling from a year of runaway coronavirus infections and the economic devastation accompanying the pandemic. Efforts to distribute the coronavirus vaccine ground to a halt.

Freezing, coughing and sneezing, families huddled into hastily established warming centers—doubtless accelerating the spread of the disease. And the desperate efforts to stay warm inevitably resulted in tragedy, such as the heartbreaking deaths of a grandmother and three children in a house fire in Sugar Land, Texas.

Texas is the second most populous state in the United States, with 29 million residents. Significant sections of American heavy industry, telecommunications and energy infrastructure, food production and logistics operations have been built up in the state as corporations took advantage of cheaper labor, available land and virtually no regulations. The massive working class in Texas, drawn from all over the world, is gathered in huge metropolitan areas such as Houston, the fourth largest in the US, San Antonio, the seventh largest, and Dallas, the ninth largest.

The Texas catastrophe is a man-made disaster, the latest in a long line of similar disasters, including the California energy crisis (2000–2001), Hurricane Katrina (2005), the Houston flood disaster in 2017 and many others.

The latest disaster in Texas is the product of corporate greed and a decades-long conspiracy between state politicians and the energy conglomerates designed to squeeze the state's population for as much profit as possible.

The conspirators cut off the Texas energy infrastructure from the national grid, the better to avoid national regulations that would have mitigated the impact of this month's winter storm. The dangers were known, especially since a 2011 winter storm produced a similar cascade of blackouts.

The Texas energy racket is the product of decades of privatization and deregulation, including a key measure sponsored by a Democrat, Steven D. Wolens, and passed by the state legislature in 1999 known as Senate Bill 7. The measure was backed by the subsequently disgraced energy company Enron. The set-up it established was used to generate countless billions in profits that flowed through Wall Street and into the pockets of the ultra-rich.

This profit-making scheme was the direct cause of the wave of blackouts across the state this month: energy production could not be maintained on account of the failure to prepare and adequately insulate the energy-producing infrastructure, and the isolated Texas grid could not keep up with the surging demand on account of the freezing temperatures.

The same capitalist principle is behind the disaster in Texas and the catastrophic response of the government to the coronavirus pandemic: profits are prioritized over measures needed to protect human life. The brunt of the consequences, as always, fall on the shoulders of the working class. Texas has seen 42,000 deaths from the coronavirus, and while the death toll from the collapse of the energy and water infrastructure remains uncertain, the official count has climbed to 58.

The response of the ruling class to the disaster was best summed up by Tim Boyd, the Republican mayor of Colorado City, Texas, who shouted with bloodthirsty glee on social media that “only the strong will survive” and the rest will “perish.”

“No one owes you [or] your family anything,” he declared, “nor is it the local government's responsibility to support you during trying times like this!” A swift popular outcry forced his resignation, but he remained unrepentant.

Boyd blurted out what is essentially the policy of all capitalist governments at every level all over the world to any disaster.

The experience of the Texas catastrophe will leave its inevitable mark on popular consciousness both inside and outside of Texas.

Outrage against the boasting, swaggering band of reactionaries and ignoramuses who constitute the Republican Party leadership in Texas is entirely justified, including that directed against US senator and Trump co-conspirator Ted Cruz, who took a luxury vacation to Cancun at the height of the crisis. The climate change-denying Texas Republicans, blinking in the global spotlight, are now flailing around with wild assertions that the crisis is actually the fault of renewable energy.

Meanwhile, the Democrats are attempting to posture as critics, hoping to become political beneficiaries of the Texas disaster. Among them are Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Cory Booker, who recently staged a highly publicized fund-raising stunt in which \$3 million was raised for Texas charities, an insignificant sum in comparison with the scale of the disaster.

In states like California, the most populous American state, the Democrats have been the ones to preside over the decades-long decay and neglect of essential infrastructure, in line with the Clinton-era policy of an “end to big government,” i.e., deregulation, and privatization across the board.

It is high time for the working class to say to the capitalist oligarchy: *Enough! Every time that we left you and your political accomplices in charge, the result was a total catastrophe. Every time we entrusted a social problem to you—like fighting the pandemic, maintaining the infrastructure in Texas, addressing climate change, or trying to make progress towards social equality—in every case, you failed to do anything but enrich yourselves. Your time is up! Now it is time for a different class to take the wheel.*

The Texas catastrophe, part of a pattern of similar catastrophes stretching back decades, is an indictment of the whole capitalist social order. The capitalist system has proven again and again impervious to science and reason, pathologically irrational, incapable of lifting a finger to address any social problem, feasting on bigger and bigger profits as thousands die every day.

The catastrophe in Texas, coming amidst the coronavirus pandemic, which has killed half a million people in the United States, makes the urgent case for the abolition of the capitalist system and its replacement with socialism.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that those responsible for the catastrophe must be held accountable, including through arrests and prosecutions. The negligence and greed of the directors and executives of the energy conglomerates and their accomplices in the state government led directly to death and destruction that will doubtless reach into the tens if not hundreds of billions of dollars in cascading economic ramifications.

The huge profits that were reaped from the Texas energy racket over the preceding decades must be traced and recovered, including from the Wall Street banks and hedge funds through which they flowed. The proceeds must be used to compensate the victims and repair the damage.

The energy conglomerates themselves must be confiscated, taken out of the hands of the capitalist oligarchs and transformed into democratically-controlled public utilities. The profit motive of the oligarchs can then be replaced with scientific planning to address climate change, shift to renewable energy, and develop more robust infrastructure in advance of future extreme weather.

Climate change, which is likely to produce more and more extreme weather events, together with infectious diseases are challenges requiring global coordination and planning.

The fight for these measures requires the mobilization of the principal social force that would benefit from their implementation, the international working class, which confronts a parallel struggle in every sphere of social and economic life around the world.

The labor of the working class is the foundation of modern human civilization, and the experience of the global pandemic has only underscored its fundamental social role, with the term “essential workers” entering popular parlance.

The fight for working class power means a fight to develop socialist consciousness in the working class and a break from the whole rotten framework of bourgeois politics, which is implicated from top to bottom in catastrophe after catastrophe.

The fight for socialism in turn requires the development of an independent political leadership committed to socialist principles, organized globally and representing the whole historical continuity and accumulated experience of the international workers movement since the development of scientific socialism in the time of Karl Marx. This is embodied in the Socialist Equality Party in the US and its sister parties around the world in the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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