

Flooding in US Midwest: A disaster created by capitalism

By Shannon Jones
23 June 2008

The flooding in the US Midwest, which has caused billions of dollars in damage and left tens of thousands homeless, has exposed the neglect and incompetence of the state and federal authorities charged with protecting lives and property along US waterways.

More than 20 levees have failed, topped or breached by floodwaters, with cities and towns along the upper Mississippi and its tributaries inundated and hundreds of thousands of acres of prime agricultural land underwater.

Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the state's second largest city with a population of 200,000, had 100 blocks of its downtown flooded because of a levee break. Apt comparisons have been made to the flooding of the city and the levee failure during Hurricane Katrina.

Levee breaks also led to the flooding of other Iowa communities including Columbus Junction, which was under more than 10 feet of water. More than 35,000 in the state have been made homeless and there is still no official count of the number of houses destroyed. At least two dozen flood-related deaths have been reported.

Damage to agriculture is still being assessed. One official with the US Department of Agriculture estimated that 160,000 acres of cropland in Illinois alone have been affected. Previous estimates indicated that 9 percent of Iowa's corn crop and 8 percent of its soybean crop were flooded. The impact on already spiraling food prices is expected to be significant.

The wholesale failure of the flood protection system in the upper Midwest points to deep systemic problems that highlight the chaos and irrationality endemic to capitalism. There have been a number of media reports pointing out that the failure of the flood protection system had been long predicted.

A report in the June 22 edition of the *New York Times*, headlined "Call for Change ignored, levees remain patchy," cites a chaotic system of levees, "owned and maintained by all sorts of towns, agencies, even individual farmers."

Many of the levees along the Mississippi River and its tributaries do not meet federal standards, the *Times* notes, "They may have poor construction, signs of stress, trees growing on them, animal burrows."

The *Times* quoted Gerald E. Galloway Jr., a former Army Corps of Engineers brigadier general. "We told them there

were going to be more floods like this. Everybody likes to go out on the levee now and offer sandbags, but that's not helpful. This shouldn't have happened in the first place."

Galloway was part of a panel of experts set up by the Clinton administration following the 1993 Midwest floods. It issued a report urging a more uniform approach to flood control along the Mississippi river system. This recommendation was largely ignored.

Part of the 1994 report stated, "many levees are poorly sited and will fail again."

"We don't even know where some of these levees are," Galloway continued, "Someone needs to go out and count the levees and see what's wrong with them."

A piece in the June 20 *Christian Science Monitor* is headlined "Floods engulf archaic levee system." Along the same lines as the *Times* it notes, "The flooding has raised questions about the adequacy of the patchwork system—in which little information is known about where levees exist, who maintains them, and what their conditions is ..."

The *Monitor* cites experts who conclude the widespread flooding "is hardly surprising, especially given the low standards to which most levees are built."

In order to qualify for the national flood insurance program, levees only need be built to a so called 100-year standard, meaning that in any given year there is less than a 0.1 percent chance that the levee will be topped by a flood. However, in the Netherlands, inland levees are built to a minimum 250-year standard, while most meet one of 1,250 years. Dutch ocean levees are built to a 10,000-year standard.

John Barry, author of the book *Rising Tide*, which chronicles the great Mississippi flood of 1927, told the *Monitor*, "Around the world, the 100-year standard is a joke. We invest on the cheap."

An article in the June 19 *Wall Street Journal* titled "Midwest Floods Dredge up Dispute" quotes scientists who argue that unplanned and chaotic development have made floods worse. It notes, "By building along the riverbanks and forcing the Mississippi into a bed that is less than half the width of where it ran a century ago, residents are displacing water and forcing the river to run faster and higher."

An even worse disaster was narrowly avoided. A report last

year indicated serious inadequacies in the levee system protecting St. Louis. Across the Mississippi on the Illinois side, leaks were discovered in the levees protecting impoverished East St. Louis where, according to an Associated Press report, at one place “water was bubbling out of the ground like a volcano.” Last year the Federal Emergency Management Agency rescinded its accreditation of the city’s levees.

Levee breaks further upstream considerably lowered the flood crest in the St Louis area, possibly averting a potentially catastrophic levee failure in a metropolitan area that is home to 2.8 million people.

The human impact of the floods has been severe. The paltry amounts of money doled out by federal disaster relief programs will not begin to compensate for the damage suffered by thousands of homeowners and small businesses. According to a report in the Associated Press, when the town of Gulfport, Illinois on the Mississippi flooded, only 28 homeowners had flood insurance. They were told by FEMA they didn’t need it because the levees were secure against a 100-year flood.

According to a report carried by AP “some FEMA floodplain maps are 20 years old and seriously outdated, based on old evaluations of levees and river conditions.” Nationally, only a tiny percentage of homeowners carry flood insurance, which is often exorbitantly expensive.

President Bush, along with presidential candidates Barack Obama and John McCain made brief visits to the flooded area in order to pose for photos with survivors and offer empty words of sympathy.

During his visit, Obama tried to make political points over McCain’s opposition to the Water Resource Development Act of 2007, which earmarked money for various hurricane, navigation and flood control projects. However, the money contained in the bill represented only a drop in the bucket compared to what is needed. Further, it did nothing to address the lack of coordination and systematic planning revealed by the recent flooding.

Now that floodwaters are subsiding, the attention of the big business politicians and the media is shifting away from the flood-devastated regions, leaving tens of thousands of ordinary people to try to put their lives together as best they can.

The wholesale breakdown of the flood protection system is not simply the result of policy failures of this or that administration. The capitalist system and its political representatives are incapable of implementing the kind of systematic response that is needed which would include upgrading levees, wetland restoration, diversion channels and a range of other measures.

The creation and funding of a rational and effective flood protection system runs entirely counter to the drive by the ruling elite over the past several decades to remove any restraints on the accumulation of private wealth. Successive administrations have dismantled government regulation and oversight, denouncing concern over public safety and health as

an impediment to the free market. As a result, basic infrastructure upon which the lives of millions of people depend has fallen into neglect and disrepair.

Currently, some are calling for a greater role to be given to the US Army Corps of Engineers. However, the Corps already has primary responsibility for flood protection along US waterways. While nominally run by the military, it contracts out most work to private businesses. The money for individual projects is appropriated by Congress, and often amounts to little more than paybacks by individual Congressmen to wealthy private interests in the their districts. For example, much of the money contained in the reconstruction bill passed by Congress in the wake of the Katrina disaster ended up benefiting oil and shipping companies.

Meanwhile, the Climate Change Science Program, a multi-agency project of the US government, issued a report last week warning that the effects of climate change would include more extreme weather. “Heavy downpours are very likely to further increase in frequency and intensity” in North America, the report warned. The Midwest has seen two 500-year floods in the space of just 15 years. Yet, Washington has continued to stonewall minimal international efforts to curb carbon emissions.

The Midwest floods again demonstrate that the complex needs of mass society are incompatible with a system that subordinates production and economic development to private profit. The stranglehold of private wealth over all facets of economic and political life in the United States insures that no appropriate lessons will be drawn from this round of catastrophic flooding—any more than they were from 1993 and Katrina—and that future and even worse disasters are inevitable.

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