

Six months since Superstorm Sandy

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Hurricane Sandy was the second most costly natural disaster in US history, after Hurricane Katrina, which struck New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in 2005, with devastating and historic consequences.

Twenty-four US states were affected by Sandy when it struck in late October 2012. From Maryland to New Hampshire along the Eastern Seaboard, the National Hurricane Center attributed 72 deaths directly to the superstorm. Another 87 deaths were the indirect result of the hurricane, from causes such as hypothermia due to power outages, carbon monoxide poisoning and accidents during cleanup efforts. The economic losses from the storm were also massive.

As devastating as the immediate effects of Sandy were, the long-term consequences continue to take an immense toll. Six months after the hurricane struck with immense force, especially in the coastal areas of New York and New Jersey, recovery efforts have been slow and uneven. Many residents and communities continue to struggle with little or no help from federal, state or local authorities.

New York's billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg marshaled the necessary resources to have the New York Stock Exchange up and running within a day of the storm surge that flooded lower Manhattan last October 29. Recovery in the financial district is now largely complete. In sharp contrast, poor and working class areas of the city, as well as the New Jersey shore, have not at all returned to previous conditions.

Those who suffered the greatest damage were low-income homeowners and renters, while those businesses that were in the worst position were small firms and shops. While much of the big business media spins hopeful stories of resilience and reconstruction, the reality for tens of thousands of working people is far different.

Available statistics indicate that 224,514 households, or 43% of those affected by the storm, reported

household incomes of less than \$30,000 a year. For workers and the poor, the loss of property and income, as well as the damage to health that many suffered as a consequence of the storm, has created immense burdens.

The loss of housing, in an area where housing costs are high and availability is limited, has been especially devastating. Six months later, tens of thousands of people remain without permanent homes. In New York City alone, approximately 600 families continue to live in hotels. The city has repeatedly threatened to cut off emergency payments, which would result in these families being thrown into the street.

Mechanisms supposedly intended to compensate for catastrophic losses, such as public and private insurance as well as other forms of assistance, are being doled out slowly, inequitably and in amounts far below what is necessary.

Congress allocated only \$60 billion for Sandy relief, while New York State alone has estimated losses totaling at least \$80 billion. By contrast, the Federal Reserve has been spending \$85 billion a month to purchase bank-held toxic assets.

Reports indicate that both the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and private insurers are using a myriad of excuses to limit or deny compensation for damages. For example, even for those with federal flood insurance, if the damage from the storm was not the direct result of inundation, but was instead caused by other effects of the hurricane (e.g., mudslides due to rain-saturated ground or wind), claims are routinely denied.

Even money that is awarded by insurers for hurricane-related losses is being delayed, to the benefit of the financial elite. Banks have been profiting by holding onto insurance payments that are supposed to go to homeowners for whom the banks hold mortgages. In November, New York officials claimed they were

prodding the banks to speed up the release of these payments. As of February, however, banks were reportedly still sitting on \$200 million. Above and beyond these delays, FEMA has determined that throughout the affected region, a total of 219,216 households that sustained damage were not covered by insurance at all.

One of the areas hardest hit by Sandy was the Rockaway peninsula, a long, thin barrier island that directly faces the Atlantic Ocean in New York City's borough of Queens. The Rockaways, as the communities on this peninsula are collectively known, are home to a range of working class residents, including a large number who live in low-income housing complexes run by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA). Across the city, almost 20% of NYCHA's 178,000 total units were in buildings that were damaged by the superstorm, and many lost electricity, heat and water for weeks.

Up and down the coast, emphasis is being placed on the restoration of facilities important for business and for summer tourism. Governor Chris Christie of New Jersey, who has already raised more than \$6 million for his reelection campaign, has pledged that the boardwalks along the Jersey Shore beaches will be rebuilt and usable by Memorial Day in late May. In New Jersey communities like Seaside Heights and Union Beach, however, progress in recovery from the hurricane has been agonizingly slow. Reports indicate that municipalities are borrowing tens of millions of dollars in order to maintain basic services, while waiting for reimbursement from the federal government for storm-related expenses.

The reopening of the Coney Island amusement area, located on the southern coast of Brooklyn facing the Atlantic, was celebrated by city, state and national politicians on March 25. Meanwhile, a demonstration of Coney Island residents protested across the street. They carried signs saying, "Coney Island Is Not Back" and "People Live Here." The public library, the community center and the neighborhood hospital either remain closed or are only semi-functional.

In another telling sign of the continuing problems as well as the priorities of the city authorities, the only subway line that reaches the Rockaway peninsula, the A train, is still not functioning in this outlying section of the city. The train is vital for residents to get to work

and to medical care and for other basic necessities, but the only option remains substitute bus service that substantially increases commuting times and is often unreliable.

Looming over the real and burning problems of the slow and uneven recovery from last year's hurricane is the recognition that so-called 100-year weather events like Superstorm Sandy are going to be increasingly frequent as a result of climate change. Sandy was not simply a natural disaster. Its impact was greatly magnified by rising sea levels, the result of global warming and more volatile weather patterns in recent years. Despite repeated warnings by climate scientists, virtually nothing has been done on this front since the latest disaster. The criminally inadequate emergency response and the inability to prepare for future events starkly illustrate the incapacity of capitalism to provide for the safety and well-being of the population, the most elementary responsibility of any social system.

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