

# The Houston flood disaster: A social crime of the American oligarchy

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The world is looking on in shock as Houston, Texas, the fourth-largest city in the United States, is engulfed by flood waters. At least nine people are dead, a figure that will no doubt rise in the coming days. Thousands remain stranded, awaiting rescue. Tens of thousands have been forced to take shelter in emergency accommodations. Some of the worst rain is yet to come.

The catastrophic flooding engulfing Houston and southeast Texas is spreading to cities as far away as Dallas and Austin and threatening to once again overwhelm New Orleans, Louisiana. Hurried evacuations are being organized in cities throughout the region, as well as previously unaffected neighborhoods in Houston, where residents are being forced to abandon their homes as officials release water from overwhelmed and endangered reservoirs.

Twelve years after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, an even larger and more populous metropolitan area is being turned into a scene of indescribable suffering. The countless examples of human solidarity among the victims, overwhelmingly working class and of all races, contrasts starkly with the indifference and incompetence of the government and political establishment.

Like Katrina, Hurricane Harvey has lifted the lid on the ugly reality of American society, exposing colossal levels of social inequality, pervasive poverty and ruling class criminality. Behind the mindless media commentary, generally favorable to the White House and the right-wing Republican governor of Texas, and the pro-forma statements of politicians, one senses nervousness and fear that this latest demonstration of the failure of American capitalism will trigger an eruption of social indignation.

But the authorities cannot conceal their complacency and indifference. In a disgusting performance,

President Donald Trump gave a press conference Monday in which he combined lavish praise for the official response to the flood disaster, calling it “incredible to watch” and a display of “cooperation and love,” with bathos about “one American family” that “hurts together and endures together.”

Reciting his scripted remarks as though he were reading the phonebook, Trump offered no proposals to relieve the suffering of the victims or provide them with money to rebuild their lives. He evaded a question about his proposal to slash hundreds of millions of dollars from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), including steep cuts to the Federal Flood Insurance Program.

FEMA administrator William “Brock” Long on Monday gave himself and the government a blanket amnesty for their dereliction, declaring, “You could not forecast this up. You could not dream this forecast up.”

The *Wall Street Journal* sounded the same theme in an editorial posted Monday. “Immunity from nature’s fury,” the newspaper wrote, “is an illusion that humans cultivate until we are forced to confront that fury again. We forget the damage that storms and earthquakes can do.”

This renunciation of any responsibility for the unfolding disaster in Houston was combined with praise for the massive accumulation of wealth among the uppermost layers of society, declaring that “Complex societies can better cope with the damage if they have a reservoir of accumulated wealth” among “private sources.” Thus, according to the leading mouthpiece of Wall Street, the answer to the unfolding tragedy in Texas is the further enrichment of the financial oligarchy!

Such claims that catastrophic events like the Texas flood are inevitable “natural disasters,” and nothing can be done either to forestall, contain or manage them,

are self-serving lies.

Houston is the most frequently flooded urban area in the country. Officials at the federal, state and local level were repeatedly warned by scientists and weather experts that the license given to real estate developers and speculators to pave over wetlands, as well as the government's refusal to build proper flood defenses, was setting the city up for an unprecedented flood disaster. These warnings were ignored.

This is the 21st century, not the Dark Ages, and the United States is the richest country in the world. Four hundred years ago, the Dutch figured out how to build cities situated below sea level. The US is, moreover, home to some of the most advanced research and engineering institutes in the world. Yet supposedly no one could have anticipated or planned for the flooding of a major city on the Gulf of Mexico?

What has been done in the 12 years since Katrina to prevent more hurricane disasters? Nothing! Or, more accurately, less than nothing, because Katrina was seized on as an opportunity to treat New Orleans as virgin territory for the privatization of public assets and establishment of a free market paradise for big business, to be replicated across the country. The most overt example of this plundering operation was the dismantling of the public school system in favor of private, for-profit charter schools.

Catastrophes such as the Texas flood are social crimes, committed by a financial aristocracy that has spent the past half-century plundering the country and neglecting its social infrastructure, while accumulating unimaginable sums of personal wealth. According to the corporate-controlled media and the entire political establishment—Democrats no less than Republicans—there is no money to build up flood defenses or rebuild crumbling bridges, roads and water systems, modernize and expand public transport or provide decent schools and housing for the population.

But there are trillions of dollars stashed away in the bank accounts and stock portfolios of the rich and the super-rich. Hundreds of billions are squandered every year on the instruments of war.

The country staggers from one preventable disaster to another: Katrina in 2005, the BP oil spill in 2010, Superstorm Sandy in 2012, and now Harvey. In between are countless floods, tornadoes, fires and other events that wreak havoc on working class and poor

families, who are left to fend for themselves by a ruling elite drowning in its own excess.

Just as in the feudal era, when the development of society required the expropriation of the landed aristocracy, so today society must seize control of its own resources from the modern aristocracy of finance and corporate wealth. The barbarians of today, who hoard society's wealth and say nothing can be done to address poverty, disease, war or repression, must go the way of all ruling classes that stand in the way of social progress.

It is not that society cannot afford the type of social investment needed to prevent or minimize the impact of events such as Hurricane Harvey. What society cannot afford is the rich.

It is to the working class—united across all racial, national and ethnic lines, both in the US and internationally—that the task falls of removing this monstrous obstacle to progress from the historical scene. The capitalist parasites must be expropriated, their wealth used to meet social needs, and their stranglehold over the means of production shattered to allow the rational, planned and humane development of economic and social life on the basis of socialist ownership and democratic control of industry, finance and the planet's natural resources.

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