

# The havoc at New York's JFK Airport and the decay of US infrastructure

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Chaos and protracted delays at New York City's John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK) continued into a fifth day Monday, leaving thousands of passengers stranded, sleeping on floors and searching for lost luggage.

The blizzard that struck the Northeast of the United States on Thursday forced the shutdown of JFK and other area airports, but after the snow storm subsided things only went from bad to worse. More than 1,000 flights to New York airports were cancelled on Thursday, with many passenger jets forced to divert to other airports or return to their point of departure after JFK pushed back its reopening from Thursday afternoon to Friday.

When the delayed flights began to arrive on Friday, planes were unable to find open gates, leaving passengers, many of them having flown from Asia, Europe and elsewhere around the world, stuck for up to eight hours on the tarmac in freezing cold, without food, power or toilets. Some of those trapped on the planes began calling 911 for emergency assistance, while others threatened to open the emergency doors to escape.

After finally being allowed off the planes, they were herded into overflowing terminals filled with a sea of unsorted luggage, with many of them forced to wait as long as another five hours to collect their bags. Airport authorities attributed the chaos in part to staffing shortages and the freezing up of ground equipment.

Even as it seemed that conditions could not become more hellish, a massive water main break Sunday flooded Terminal 4, the old International Arrivals Terminal, sending water cascading from the ceiling and spilling over flight monitors. Suitcases and luggage carts floated in what became a three-inch-deep lake. Passengers were evacuated in darkness as power was

shut off. The pipe that burst had not been weather-proofed, making the disaster all but inevitable.

Port Authority Director Rick Cotton said the catastrophe would be investigated. "The Port Authority is committed to providing the highest caliber of service to all travelers and we will hold those responsible accountable for any shortcomings we find," he said.

No one should hold his breath for the Port Authority to make those who bear the real responsibility for the disastrous conditions at JFK accountable. The Port Authority is perhaps the most unaccountable agency in the United States, its executive positions filled by political hacks appointed by the governors of New York and New Jersey. A pair of them were recently convicted on conspiracy, fraud and other charges stemming from the closure of lanes leading onto the George Washington Bridge as an act of political retaliation on behalf of New Jersey's Republican Governor Chris Christie against a New Jersey mayor.

Cotton shrugged off any responsibility on the part of the agency itself, the nominal operator of JFK. He pointed out that Terminal 4, where the flood occurred, was run not by the Port Authority, but rather by a private Dutch-based consortium. The most recently reported annual compensation of that firm's CEO topped \$900,000.

All of the terminals are leased out to different concessionaires, most of them formed by alliances of airlines, which guard their control of gates as a guarantee of market share. This profit-driven arrangement played a major role in the havoc of the past five days, as planes were able to land but not deboard their passengers. Pilots had to wait for gates to open up in the terminals run by their airlines, even as gates sat empty at other terminals.

JFK is the premier international air passenger

gateway to North America. While critics, including US President Donald Trump, have described conditions at it and other New York area airports as “third world,” in many countries given this label airports and other transportation facilities are better run and more efficient than what prevails in the United States.

That such conditions exist in New York City, the so-called “capital of the world”—in reality, the capital of US finance capital—is testament to the criminal neglect of basic infrastructure on the part of a parasitic financial oligarchy that controls both major political parties and pursues socially destructive policies aimed solely at furthering its own self-enrichment.

The disaster at Kennedy comes barely three weeks after a similar breakdown saw Atlanta’s international airport—the busiest in the US—entirely shut down by a power outage, snarling air traffic throughout the country during one of the busiest flying seasons. The same week saw the derailment of an Amtrak train in Washington state, killing three passengers, the latest in a series of accidents plaguing the chronically underfunded and antiquated passenger rail service.

New York City, home to Wall Street and the surging stock exchange, is plagued by the protracted deterioration of basic infrastructure even as a thin layer at the top amasses unimaginable wealth. The city is home to the world’s largest concentration of billionaires, 82 of whom boast a combined net worth of \$397.9 billion. Another nearly 9,000 individuals in the city each have at least \$30 million in net assets.

Two weeks ago, Bloomberg reported that the world’s richest 500 billionaires increased their combined assets by \$1 trillion in the course of 2017, an increase of 23 percent, to \$5.3 trillion. This colossal diversion of resources into private wealth accumulation by the financial oligarchy starves society of the resources it needs to deal with the most basic problems.

Nowhere is this seen more starkly than in New York City. Side by side with the financial aristocracy, the city’s homeless population is at a record high since the Great Depression of the 1930s, with more than 60,000 people in shelters every night and many more sleeping on the streets.

Monday was typical for the city’s deteriorating subway system, upon which millions of workers depend to get to work and home again. Fifteen separate subway lines saw delays and slowdowns due to

mechanical breakdowns, signal failures and switch problems, with passengers forced to wait in some cases 40 minutes for a train, and half-hour commutes into Manhattan turning into 90-minute ordeals.

In the city’s public housing, thousands of people went without heat and hot water during the record cold snap because of inadequate boilers in their buildings.

For the moneyed elite that monopolizes the city’s wealth, these are not real issues. They no more use JFK than they do the subways. They are able to take helicopters to private jets and VIP terminals in places like Teterboro, New Jersey, never having to brush up against the working people that make the city run.

Holding “accountable” those responsible for the havoc wreaked upon passengers at JFK, not to mention the homeless, or the working people who lose hours each day due to a crumbling subway system, is possible only by means of a struggle to break the stranglehold exercised by Wall Street and the financial elite over the whole of society.

The vast wealth of this financial oligarchy must be expropriated and utilized to resolve the pressing social problems of housing, health care, education and mass transit. The trillions being spent on Washington’s military and intelligence apparatus to carry out war and mass murder across the planet must be redirected into confronting these problems, both in the US and internationally.

The entire economy, both in the US and around the world, must be placed on new foundations, based on the abolition of private ownership of the banks and corporations and the establishment of public ownership and democratic control. The vast wealth produced by the working class must be used to meet social needs, not squandered on satisfying the insatiable drive of the oligarchs for profit and personal wealth.

The debacle at JFK, the gateway to America, expresses in a concentrated form the rot and historical bankruptcy of the capitalist system. The reorganization of society on socialist foundations is a matter of ever greater urgency.

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