

Hurricane Florence: Another man-made catastrophe in the making

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Hurricane Florence is expected to make landfall on the Carolina coast tonight in what is projected to be one of the most destructive storms ever to hit the United States.

As Florence was making its way to the mid-Atlantic coast on Tuesday, President Trump hailed his administration's response to Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico last year as an "an incredible, unsung success." He added yesterday morning on Twitter that his administration "got A Pluses" for its response to Hurricane Harvey in Houston and Hurricane Irma in Florida. Residents of North and South Carolina could expect a similar government response, he implied, boasting, "We are ready for the big one that is coming!"

Trump's "unsung success" in Puerto Rico was a relief effort that left millions of people stranded without electricity or running water for months. The death toll, which had been covered up for almost a year, is now acknowledged by the territorial government to be nearly 3,000, including many people who died after the storm due to a lack of medical supplies and electricity to run lifesaving equipment.

Summing up the priorities of the ruling class, the Trump administration recently siphoned off \$10 million from FEMA to pay for detention centers for immigrants as part of Trump's fascistic scapegoating of immigrants and refugees.

The disastrously inadequate character of the federal response to last year's hurricanes was outlined in a recent report by the Government Accountability Office, which found that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was understaffed by 30 percent and was already stretched to capacity by Hurricanes Harvey and Irma when Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico.

Last year's hurricanes, together with Trump's statements, indicate what residents of the Eastern seaboard can expect from Hurricane Florence: a natural disaster greatly compounded by government indifference and neglect. Already, chaotic but by now familiar scenes are unfolding, with traffic backed up for miles as people flee the projected path of the hurricane, and the poor, the elderly and others who are unable or lack the resources to evacuate are left to fend for themselves. Grocery shelves have been emptied out

by shoppers scrambling for supplies. Officials are warning of power outages lasting for weeks.

Thirteen years after Hurricane Katrina nearly destroyed the historic port city of New Orleans and killed more than 1,800 people, nothing has been done to protect the population of the United States from hurricanes and other natural disasters. Nothing has been done to significantly improve the country's hurricane defense infrastructure, such as drainage systems and levees; no serious plans have been organized and funded to provide for emergency evacuation and shelter; disaster relief funding remains far below what would be required to make the victims of hurricanes economically whole.

Katrina laid bare the staggering levels of poverty and inequality in America and the consequences of decades of social counterrevolution, in which the financial elite has had a free hand to plunder the nation's resources and rob its workers.

That was followed by the 2010 BP oil spill, which inflicted untold economic and environmental damage on a large part of the Gulf Coast.

Last year, widespread floods demonstrated that New Orleans' drainage system remains in serious disrepair. The nearby city of Baton Rouge suffered even more serious floods the prior year.

Even as the East Coast braces for Hurricane Florence, California is grappling with the largest wildfire in its history. The severity and frequency of such events will only increase in the coming years as a consequence of man-made global warming.

However, the vulnerability of the United States to natural disasters arises not only from global warming, but above all from the dysfunctional, irrational and grotesquely unequal structure of American society. The United States is ruled—through both the Democrats and the Republicans—by a financial oligarchy that lives at the expense of society and is ruthless in the defense of its vast wealth and power.

Ten years ago, after the September 15, 2008 financial crash, the Bush and Obama administrations allocated trillions of dollars to buy up the toxic financial assets held

by the banks and pump cash into the financial system, deliberately pushing up stock prices to allow the financial parasites not only to recoup their losses, but to drive up their wealth to previously unheard-of heights.

By comparison, Congress last year authorized only \$90 billion in hurricane relief, or roughly one-third of the total cost of the 2017 hurricane season. Puerto Rico received no relief from the financial oversight imposed by Obama in behalf of the territory's bank and hedge fund creditors, who dictated brutal spending cuts. The result was a further degradation of the island's infrastructure, including its already antiquated power grid.

The gutting of corporate regulations and the \$1.5 trillion tax cut passed by Congress last December have driven profits to record highs. The Dow Jones Industrial Average has surged nearly 10,000 points above its November 2016 level, inflated by stock buybacks and mergers and acquisitions.

The financial oligarchy spares no expense to prosecute its global interests by means of military violence. In June, Senate Democrats joined with Republicans to pass a \$716 billion military budget, an \$82 billion increase. Funding for US intelligence and police agencies and ongoing wars brings the total spent for "national security" to more than \$1 trillion. The government response to major natural disasters invariably includes the deployment of National Guard troops to crack down on unrest and protect capitalist property.

In Newport News, Virginia, just north of Florence's projected path through North Carolina, the US Navy is in the process of building 10 new nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, each of which by itself costs roughly the same as the entire annual budget of FEMA.

Natural disasters expose in the most concentrated and tragic form the social conditions of inequality, poverty and oppression that are pervasive in working-class communities across the country. In parts of Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland and other cities that have been devastated by deindustrialization, one sees scenes resembling New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward, which was mostly destroyed by Katrina. The lead poisoning of Flint's water supply has been followed by the shutoff of water in the public schools of that city as well as Detroit due to unsafe levels of contaminants.

The root cause of the collapse of infrastructure and the miserable response to natural disasters is the capitalist system. Not only in the United States, but throughout the world—as seen in the recent bridge collapse in Genoa, Italy—the capitalist class neglects basic infrastructure because such spending is seen as a drain on its profits. Serious international planning to address problems such as climate change, poverty and natural disasters is impossible

in a system based on private ownership of the means of production and the anarchy of the market, operating within the framework of rival nation-states.

These urgent issues require a socialist and international solution. This includes a multitrillion-dollar public works program to modernize and rebuild decaying infrastructure, including stronger levee systems and surge protection, drainage systems and a modern electrical grid. It provides for an integrated and coordinated emergency evacuation and shelter plan to remove all residents, regardless of age or income, from harm's way. It allocates the resources to ensure that all who suffer financial losses from the storm are made economically whole. It provides hundreds of thousands of good-paying jobs to rebuild the schools, roads and water systems and provide high-quality, inexpensive public housing.

The resources for such a program exist. They must be obtained through the expropriation of the financial oligarchy. In a country where the three richest individuals—Bezos, Gates and Buffett—possesses more wealth than the bottom half of the country, to claim there is no money for such a program is to insult the intelligence of the population!

The banks and major corporations—including high tech, transportation, logistics, auto, steel, energy and other key sectors of the economy—must be placed under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class. Such measures will make possible the creation of a planned economy to marshal society's resources in the interests of human need, not private profit.

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