

Tropical Storm Sandy: Natural or Political Disaster?

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Environment](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

“Homes still lack power a week on”. Financial Times 11/5/12, p. 3

“Households suffer without power as temperatures fall and storm looms”. Financial Times 11/6//12, p. 3

“Climate change needs action but it has a cost”, Financial Times 11/5/12, p. 4

“City accused of not acting on plan”, Financial Times 11/1/12, p. 3

Introduction

What has the world’s biggest and most costly ‘national security state’ have to do with securing the life, livelihood and property of the global financial capital of the world? Virtually nothing!

Ten days after tropical storm Sandy struck, over 730,000 people still lacked electricity in New York and New Jersey and nearly 150,000 in New York City . Nearly 50,000 families are without housing; hundreds of thousands wait in the cold for water, food and gasoline deliveries. Millions crowd barely operating public transport, as tempers flare: commuters push and shove to get to work, school and to meet their daily obligations.

Mainstream media emphasize the ‘forces of nature’, blaming the storm for the losses. The ‘alternative media’ point to climate change. The former ignore the fact that the socio-economic impact of the storm is a result of political-economic decisions; the latter overlook the specific short-term policies which could have prevented or lessened the impact of the storm.

Imperial Capabilities and Domestic Neglect

Three long and short-term inter-related factors were responsible for the loss of over a hundred lives and \$50 billion dollars in property damage: Neo-liberal policies, climate change and militarist empire building leading to domestic neglect and decay. Addressing these policy issues helps us answer most of the questions raised by the multitude of angry New York and New Jersey residents. A compilation of the questions from the victims would include:

Why no civil defense - no serious effort at crises prevention?

Why no protective levees, protective walls, evacuation plans?

Why prolonged delays in state delivery of food, water, gas?

Why the breakdown in the recovery of electricity by the private utility companies, especially in poor neighborhoods?

Why the breakdown of the infrastructure?

These and other basic questions point to long-term, large-scale structural weaknesses, especially the misallocation of hundreds of billions of dollars in public resources from domestic priorities to empire building and financial bailouts.

Militarism Abroad Amidst Domestic Decay

The US government annually spends over \$800 billion dollars on weapons, overseas military bases (over 700), military roads, highways, bridges and troop transport; it spends unpublished billions funding clandestine proxy wars, private mercenaries, Special Forces' operations and puppet regimes on four continents. Federal, state and municipal regimes spend billions on "Homeland Security" and its local subsidiaries engaged in spying on 40 million US citizens and persecuting Muslim citizens and residents while arresting, deporting and profiling millions of Hispanic and Asian immigrants.

Inappropriately named, "Homeland Security" actually creates domestic insecurity via police state methods and by failing to protect and secure the lives, property and livelihood of millions of US citizens, as shown so clearly by the plight of millions in the aftermath of tropical storm Sandy .

Homeland Security, with its million-member bureaucracy and subsidiaries has had years to prepare for massive storm-induced coastal flooding and power outages. Official reports, prepared by experts three years prior to Hurricane Sandy, high-lighted the vulnerability of power stations, subway systems and high rise apartments. But Homeland Security was too occupied with X-raying and sniffing travelers at airports, train and bus stations and tapping citizens' phones, faxes and internet communications.

At least 10 days before the storm hit the Eastern coast, the Federal Emergency Management Agency(FEMA) was informed of its trajectory and likely impact. Yet nothing was done to mobilize temporary housing and gasoline reserves. Instead the FEMA functionaries sat passively in their offices and after the storm, registered the requests of the desperate scores of thousands of homeless victims. FEMA's top bureaucrat, Craig Fugate, told the victims they should not expect any prompt recovery. "This will not be done in months. This will not be done in a year" (Financial Times, 11/5/12, p. 3.). Yet millions of dollars flow daily to NATO proxies in Libya , Somalia and Syria .

The seeming paralysis and obvious inefficiency of Homeland Security is not due to lack of personnel, information or funds. It is no accident that Homeland Security is not prepared to intervene on behalf of US citizens in crisis. Their personnel are trained, rewarded and promoted according to the number and "quality" of terrorists suspects they identify and monitor. They are at their best (or worst) in profiling and entrapping Muslim suspects and activists and not in mobilizing tankers and ships to transport gasoline and bring mobile homes for the homeless disaster victims.

When it comes to mobilizing a naval armada for the Persian Gulf to intimidate Iran or to

supply Israel with the most up-to-date weaponry, the Pentagon “engages” post-haste; but when it comes to evacuating thousands of elderly, disabled and vulnerable Americans trapped in high-rise apartments without light or heat, the Marines are nowhere to be seen.

Obviously the empire is “efficient” abroad and homeland security is deficient at home because empire politics dominate the political agenda as defined by the President, the Congress and their state and local satraps.

Neo-liberalism and the Making of Natural Disasters

The Stock Market was up and running in two days. Their electronic board was lit. Billion-dollar bets were flashed to millionaire traders, while two million residents of Greater New York shivered in darkness. Was this telling us what and who have class priorities to essential services? In his first term, the Obama regime poured \$4 trillion of public money to save the Wall Street speculators. The latter have recovered and surpassed pre-crises profit margins. New York State and municipal governments have granted multi-billion dollar tax concessions to Wall Street and private corporations, while the public infrastructures, subways, transport, highways, electrical systems and civil defense have been starved for funds.

The “storm” did not “cause” the human disaster!

Neo-liberal policies, as well as the financial and political powers backing them, ensured that the City and its most vulnerable citizens would be adversely affected. Infrastructure deteriorations, breakdown of water and sanitation and prolonged electrical blackouts are products of public disinvestment and private profit-taking; delays in repairing the electric grid are products of cuts in the labor force. While the state and federal government compiles detailed data files on every mosque, and Muslim charity donor and whoever else might voice a criticism of the State of Israel, it has no ‘data’ on our vulnerable elderly and disabled citizens trapped in high rises, public housing and nursing homes. These citizens suffered cold, thirst and hunger in darkness and many lacked medicine. Some died. None existed in the priority registries of Homeland Security.

The tax write-offs, granted to Wall Street firms, could have financed the entire upgrading of our civil defense; public ownership and investment could have upgraded and secured our electrical grid. Environmentally and socially conscious politicians would have given priority to implementing the recommendations from expert scientists and engineers to meet the rising dangers from earth warming and climate change. Instead, free market ideology dictated that the promotion of finance, insurance and real estate capital in New York and New Jersey should dominate the public agenda.

Climate Change

New York City , the self-appointed cultural and intellectual center of the United States , had recognized the dangers of climate change: its public officials had even appointed a committee of experts to study the problem. They issued a timely report warning of the dire consequences of doing nothing. Typical of New York City politics, such critical committee reports would have provided ‘symbolic gratification’ for liberals, the illusion that something ‘progressive’ might be in the works. And so speakers at radical forums could congratulate themselves that they had spoken up about the consequences of climate change. And then came Sandy .

In fact virtually nothing had been done. Worse, nothing is being done even at the most immediate and tragic level of aiding the millions of victims. Governor Cuomo utters meaningless threats to ConEd for the prolonged delays and blatant failures to restore power. The sufferers, backed up at the gas stations, vent their anger against each other. Price gouging is rampant. Private charities, neighbors and citizens make do with micro-aid programs. The vast US Empire crumbles internally from the dry rot of decaying infrastructure. Its citizens slosh through overflowing sewers. President Obama opposed carbon controls while promoting the massive extraction of more coal, oil and gas through techniques like hydraulic fracking and more carbon dioxide and green-house gases fill the air.

The world-famous New York Philharmonic can play a “Requiem for the New Atlantis” as more waves inundate lower Manhattan . Meanwhile, the impregnable Wall Street re-locates inland; its move financed by the impoverished upstate municipalities’ massive tax write-offs to the billionaires.

Long live the Empire State !

Long live the Big Apple!

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