

United States: How Houston was left to drown under Hurricane Harvey

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Politicians cannot feign surprise at the disaster they literally paved the way for, explains Seth Uzman.

STORMS ARE natural, but what happens in response to them is not. Flooding in the wake of Hurricane Harvey, which smashed into the Gulf Coast on August 25, has left at least nine people dead, thousands in need of rescue on rooftops or in boats, hundreds of thousands more without power and tens of thousands in need of shelter.

Yet characterizations of the carnage by the National Weather Service as “historic,” [1] “unprecedented” or “beyond anything experienced” [2] should not be conflated with the spurious claim that the devastation wrought by Harvey is “unpreventable” or “unexpected.”

The outcry by advocates, experts and activists against the unplanned, for-profit development of cities like Houston has been consistently ignored by city officials, leaving millions—especially the poor and people of color—in the fourth-largest city in the U.S. in a death trap.

“Houston is the fourth-largest city, but it’s the only city that does not have zoning,” Dr. Robert Bullard, a Houston resident and a professor who studies environmental racism, told *Democracy Now!* on August 29 [3]. “[As a result], communities of color and poor communities have been unofficially zoned as compatible with pollution...We call that environmental injustice and environmental racism. It is that plain, and it’s just that simple.”

The image of elderly people in a nursing home sitting in waist-deep water [4] is a shocking illustration of how the most vulnerable segments of the population are struggling to deal with the effects of Harvey. Thankfully, all of those people have been rescued and brought to safety [5].

But, as Dr. Bullard points out, the nightmare for tens of thousands of the city’s poorest residents living in close proximity to Houston’s vast petrochemical industry is just beginning. They are literally being gassed by and steeped in the toxic materials unleashed by the floodwaters that have damaged the oil refineries and chemical manufacturers that surround their homes and neighborhoods [6].

The choices facing people in these neighborhoods are gut-wrenching. Should you and your family stay as toxic floodwaters rise all around you? If you decide to go, where do you go?

THE CHOICES confronting Houston’s undocumented population are equally terrifying.

Just hours before Harvey made landfall (and exactly one week before the state’s notorious “show me your papers” bill [7] known as SB 4 is set to take effect), Customs and Border Patrol officials announced they would maintain their checkpoints to verify immigration status as people fled north [8], evacuating ahead of the approaching destruction.

Although Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, bowing to the ensuing public criticism [9], announced that those fleeing would have access to shelters regardless of their immigration status [10], the overall message to the undocumented was clear: drown or get deported.

The private prison corporations running Abbott's detention centers, their cells filled by raids and roundups carried out by the state's deportation machine, were similarly opaque about their plans to deal with the prisoners under their control [11].

Confusion continued with contradictory orders from city and state officials about whether residents should stay or flee. Many stayed behind, some without the money to do otherwise. The homeless were naturally distrustful of the police, who have denied them access to food and hounded them from the streets, under the rule of Mayor Sylvester Turner [12].

The common refrain from local officials in Houston and elsewhere was that telling people to leave would simply trap people on the roads as the storm arrived—so people should just take shelter where they were and hope for the best.

But this makes it seem as though the situation facing city managers in Houston was an unanticipated dilemma, and that the city's captains of industry and elected officials haven't had a hand in constructing the conditions that made the effects of Harvey so devastating and turned parts of Houston into a deathtrap.

Houston's lack of infrastructure to manage potential flood events is in many ways an environmental expression of the crisis of neoliberalism. As a crucial port city that thrives off of oil revenues, Houston is one of the largest profit-making urban areas in the U.S.

The flood of fixed capital, particularly into the construction and petrochemical sectors, has also made the city a flood capital. Heavy investment in impermeable concrete has turned wetlands into high rises, shopping malls, parking lots and manufacturing platforms.

But wetlands are irreplaceable as natural shock absorbers for heavy rainfall and reduce the risk of flooding. Concrete, by contrast, acts like a sluice to transmit and concentrate water. The activities of developers thus transform nearby neighborhoods, once relatively safe from flooding, into basins for collecting floodwater.

Even when regulations are imposed, they are routinely ignored and go unenforced. But regulation is rare because elected officials are the lapdogs of developers [13] who regard better drainage systems as an unconscionable cost that others should pay for—in particular, through regressive taxes on working people.

LOCATED IN a region prone to heavy rain, Houston's last significant flood prevention measure was a set of dams introduced in the 1940s to prevent the city's system of bayous from overflowing into its central business district. The dams, however, were in the middle of repair as the storm arrived Friday—just as the levies around New Orleans were being upgraded when Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005.

In order to avoid the embarrassment of a levy breach reminiscent of Katrina, the Army Corps of Engineers opted for a controlled release of a limited amount of water to lower the stress on the dams [14], their fragility a hieroglyph of a general crisis of public infrastructure thrown into sharp relief by Harvey's arrival.

Houston meanwhile has been subject to devastating floods for decades, the most memorable of which was not Hurricane Ike in 2008, but tropical storm Allison in 2001, which left 41 people dead.

Massive storms that flooded the city in 2015 were likewise described as “unprecedented [15].”

Having ignored the warnings of scientists and the protests of trapped residents, officials are now feigning ignorance and surprise despite the fact that they facilitated the transformation of Houston into a capitalist fantasyland that doesn't absorb water, but gathers it in.

We drown in the accumulating water; they “drown” in the accumulating profits.

But if “unprecedented,” “once-in-a-lifetime,” “historic” weather events are happening with greater frequency—the number of natural disasters has quadrupled since 1970, according to the *Economist* [16]—then it should be obvious that they are no longer unprecedented, once-in-a-lifetime, historic events. They are the new normal, brought about fossil-fueled climate change.

In that sense, they may in fact be unnatural storms.

Rising air and ocean temperatures alongside increased levels of water vapor in the atmosphere—the consequences of extracting and burning fossil fuels—have created the conditions for powerful storms, like Harvey, to emerge in the Gulf. These conditions cause them to move slowly through the open ocean, siphoning up ever-increasing amounts of water that return to earth once the storms make landfall.

When Harvey struck, worsening atmospheric conditions also meant that there was little wind to keep the storm moving once on land. As a result, like Allison, Harvey came ashore and hovered, dumping 11 trillion gallons of water [17] and transforming poor and working-class neighborhoods into water tanks. (A couple years ago, this was the exact shortfall of water responsible for California's “unprecedented” drought [18].)

HOUSTON'S FATE provides merely a glimpse of what's to come for other coastal cities as sea levels continue to rise.

Nuclear power plants and petrochemical processing sites in Bay City, just east of Houston, and elsewhere along the coast are unnatural disasters lying in wait for an unnatural storm to set them loose.

Reports have estimated damages in the tens of billions of dollars and claimed the storm has set Houston back years. But the fact is that capitalism has rigged the cities of the Gulf Coast for disaster from top to bottom.

As in New Orleans with Hurricane Katrina and more recently after Hurricanes Ike and Sandy, the destruction in the wake of Hurricane Harvey will leave Houston wide open to the vultures of “disaster capitalism” [19] as publicly owned infrastructure, liquidated by the storm's unnatural carnage, is replaced with further private development—and more impermeable concrete.

The White (House) supremacist [20], meanwhile, seems to have been overcome by an irrepressible urge to flatter Hurricane Harvey on Twitter, as if the mainstream media's personification of the storm is real. It makes you wonder whether he thinks Gulf Coast residents did something to provoke Harvey, with its flooding “on many sides.”

Trump made his priorities clear as he doubled down on his racist economic nationalism by announcing his plan to resume the transfer of military hardware to police forces [21] and pardoning the grotesque Sheriff Joe Arpaio [22] as news coverage of Harvey—a storm already reminiscent of Hurricane Katrina, which laid bare the fault lines of race and class in New Orleans—was ramping up.

Houston's ruling class has no ability (not just for want of competence, but that too), much less interest, in resolving the city's flood problems, and Trump is certain to buttress their project by fomenting racial divisions among the downtrodden while he diverts the necessary funds for urgently needed public services to a barbaric budget for military spending [23].

Ultimately, a real recovery from social tragedies like Harvey will come from struggles that seek to reconfigure urban space in the interests of working-class people—by overturning the system that currently designs it to maximize the extraction of profit no matter the human or environmental cost.

Seth Uzman, August 30, 2017

* <https://socialistworker.org/2017/08/30/how-houston-was-left-to-drown-under-hurricane-harvey>

Too poor to flee the hurricane

In the detritus of Hurricane Harvey a splash of red, white and blue catches the eye. Retour ligne automatique

It is a rain-sodden American flag, half-hidden under the green leaves of fallen trees.

A few paces away Judie McRae, 44, is inspecting the damage to her trailer home.

Judie has lived more than half of her life here but she says this is her first hurricane. She spent it hunkered down in bed, unable to sleep.

She does not want to see another one.

« I just felt like my roof was going to come off at any minute, » she says, describing a terrible sound of « cracking and creaking » that only stopped for a few minutes of calm when the eye of the hurricane passed directly over her head.

« I was very fortunate that only two little windows got broke, » she says.

Exactly how fortunate is obvious. Three of her neighbours' houses lie in ruins. Sheet metal has been twisted out of shape and insulation foam hangs from the trees. Books and clothes are soaking in the rain. One powder blue trailer home has caved in completely, its wooden skeleton broken and exposed.

As we examine the damage a young man arrives, agitated. He asks us if we have checked inside for the owner. We have not.

« Dan, are you in here ? » he shouts.

We climb into the wreckage to help search for Dan, gingerly stepping over the missing man's possessions and clambering around his bathtub. There is no-one here. Retour ligne automatique
'It was ferocious'

Judie, meanwhile, is worried about two other neighbours. Both got out before the storm struck and have not yet returned to learn that their homes are destroyed.

She is particularly concerned about the elderly woman who lives two trailers along.

« She has no money and that was her home and it was already crap so... » Judie tails off as if she can think of no useful way to complete the thought, no hope to offer.

Meanwhile, down on the shore of Rockport, Robert Zbranek, 56, is trying to secure his boat to the dock after it broke free during the storm.

Alongside, a small sailing yacht is under water.

The yacht, Robert explains, was his home. He was inside when the hurricane swept over, smashing the hull. At the height of the most powerful storm in Texas since 1961, with winds blowing at 130mph (215km/h), he had to get out and scramble into his car, which he had parked behind a truck for shelter.

Even then he did not feel safe as, he says, the vehicle was lifted off the ground by the high winds but it worked.

What was it like ? « Rough, » he laughs.

I suggest that some people might question his sanity.

« I know I'm crazy, » he says with a smile. « It was supposed to be a category two, maybe a category three but it didn't turn out that way. It was absolutely ridiculous. Ferocious. »

« I still got a house, » he adds. « It's just a little tore up. »

As we are chatting Robert's friend, Craig Hack, 56, appears. He too rode out the storm on a small sailing yacht.

« I just about lost my mast, » he says, cackling when I ask how it was. « No brains » is his answer.

Both men say they stayed because they wanted to be with their boat homes and their vehicles. They agreed that many folk like them would have lost money in the storm because they did not have insurance.

'Hardscrabble' town

Here in this coastal town that is a familiar story, of people struggling to make ends mean, let alone to thrive.

Rockport was founded as a cattle abattoir and meat-packing port after the American civil war of 1861-1865.

Named after its geology - it sits on a solid rock ledge - the town and its adjoining neighbour, Fulton, did well for many years, first on the beef trade and later thanks to fishing and shrimping.

By the time the 20th Century had dawned, a railway was bringing in tourists too

They still come, spending time and money boating and birdwatching, with ornithologists keen to see whooping cranes and hummingbirds.

But their money does not seem to have done much for the people of the port or of its wooded suburbs.

« Hardscrabble » is the word Americans use to describe a place like Rockport. It is overwhelmingly white (88.7% at the last census in 2010) and voted decisively for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election.

Life here is tough, says Judie, never more so than now.

There is some good news though. Judie thinks that Dan, the missing man, got out with relatives or friends just before the storm.

« God was with us, » she says of her own survival though as she glances around at the destruction, she sounds a little unsure.

Judie stayed, she tells me, because she had no means to leave and no place to go

« I had some problems getting out of town, a little broke and stuff, so I had to come home and, you know, tough it out, » she says. « We're all the working class people. »We're the ones who go to the restaurants and wait on you and pick up your trash and do all that work. We don't have a lot of money.« »Fighting for the American dream," she adds, with a rueful laugh.

James Cook

BBC News, Rockport

27 August 2017

* <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-41065335>

Footnotes

[1] <https://twitter.com/NWS/status/901832717070983169>

[2] <https://twitter.com/NWS/status/901832717070983169>

[3] https://www.democracynow.org/2017/8/29/hurricane_harvey_zip_code_race_determine

[4] <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/texas-nursing-home-residents-evacuated-harvey-flood-waters/>

[5] <https://www.rawstory.com/2017/08/houston-nursing-home-residents-shown-calmly-awaiting-flood-rescue-share-new-photo-after-moving-to-safety/>

[6] <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/weather/2017/08/29/refineries-chemical-plants-spewedtons-pollutants-harvey-forced-shut>

[7] <https://socialistworker.org/2017/07/31/outraged-and-unafraid-in-texas>

[8] <https://theintercept.com/2017/08/25/border-patrol-checkpoints-in-texas-will-stay-open-as-hurricane-evacuation-is-underway/>

[9] <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/aclu-upset-border-patrol-checkpoints-in-texas-remain-open-as-hurricane-harvey-nears/article/2632622>

- [10] <https://twitter.com/MSNBC/status/901115810617344004>
- [11] <https://rewire.news/article/2017/08/25/private-prisons-detention-centers-harveys-path-leave-migrants-no-path-evacuation/>
- [12] <https://www.click2houston.com/news/aclu-files-lawsuit-on-behalf-of-houstons-homeless>
- [13] <https://www.propublica.org/article/boomtown-flood-town-text>
- [14] <http://www.thedailybeast.com/two-of-americas-most-dangerous-dams-are-barely-protecting-houston-right-now>
- [15] <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/weather/houston-texas-hit-unprecedented-flooding-seven-states-risk-n364456>
- [16] <https://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2017/08/daily-chart-19>
- [17] <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/27/us/harvey-impact-by-the-numbers-trnd/index.html>
- [18] <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/12/18/us/california-rains-and-drought/index.html>
- [19] <https://socialistworker.org/2012/12/03/vultures-that-prey-on-disaster>
- [20] <https://socialistworker.org/2017/08/15/white-house-supremacists>
- [21] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/28/us/politics/trump-police-military-surplus-equipment.html>
- [22] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-defends-joe-arpaiio-pardon_us_59a480c6e4b050afa90c12d7
- [23] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/27/us/politics/trump-nuclear-overhaul.html>