

USA

Statement on Hurricane Sandy and the Climate Crisis

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The superstorm was a catastrophe waiting to happen in the era of global warming. Rather than an ordinary late-season hurricane, Sandy became a monster fuelled by the heated waters of the Atlantic. It smashed through the Caribbean, causing massive damage and dozens of deaths both in Cuba (which is generally well-prepared for such disasters) and Haiti (which isn't). But destruction in the global South is all too quickly forgotten, and would have been in this case if not for what happened next.

As the storm, now 800 miles in diameter, moved up the U.S. Atlantic seaboard, Sandy encountered another meteorological phenomenon that will become more frequent as the Arctic warms up – a southward deflection of the jet stream, creating a “blocking” high-pressure zone that prevented the storm from turning northeast and blowing itself out in the ocean. Instead it hung a left at Atlantic City, and we all know the rest.

In fact, even as it pulverized New Jersey and New York City, the superstorm combined with an eastward-moving cold front, causing violent weather and a freak blizzard dumping two feet of snow at elevations in West Virginia – but perhaps if anything mitigating the full coastal impact. What the impact might have been in New York and New Jersey of Category 2 or 3 hurricane winds, rather than Category 1, we can only guess – until, perhaps, the next time.

What is that “next time”? Unknown, obviously – but as a natural disaster in the climate framework of 10,000 or so years of human civilization, a storm of this magnitude might be expected to hit every few centuries at most, and it wouldn't have hit densely populated coastlines with the natural defenses (marshes, dunes and the like) filled in or paved over. It's different now: We may see events of this scale every few years, of course with no way of knowing where or when the next one might hit. This catastrophe is only one manifestation of a global disaster. In countries like Bangladesh and many south Asian nations, displacement of the monsoon rains have brought both mammoth flooding and severe drought. Australia has suffered epidemics of flood, drought and wildfire. The list is endless. Like Katrina, like the Midwestern drought, like waves of forest fire in the U.S. west, Sandy is an event that brings our society face to face with its real condition – but only if we are willing and able to look. It is all the more unbelievable – or in another way, all too predictable – that no questions about human-induced climate change were even asked, much less addressed, by the capitalist parties' presidential candidates in the just-concluded election.

For their part, energy companies and a string of politicians have attempted to divert us from the pressing problem of climate change. They talk about “North American independence” from “foreign” oil with their sales claims about the tar sands, natural gas, fracking and other methods of extracting fossil fuels.

The most fundamental questions can only be addressed in an entirely new way, from below. Beyond

the immediate and overwhelming problems of bringing emergency housing, heat, food and fuel to devastated communities in Staten Island and Far Rockaway— and other places that remained in desperate crisis while power was restored in the financial district – are profound questions of where, how and even whether to “rebuild.”

As one Solidarity comrade in Brooklyn suggests: “Yes, whether you had power or not, whether your home caught fire from severed power lines, whether your home, or your car, or you, were struck by a falling tree, were all a matter of luck. The intense flooding of Zone A, however, was inevitable — if not in this storm then in the next one. That’s why NYC has had evacuation plans in place for decades in the event a hurricane strikes this part of the world.”

“The construction of major towns, like Long Beach, on barrier islands, the intensive development of shorelines — in particular the building of homes in flood zones — is a human-made disaster, fueled by greed and by human hubris, a sense that somehow we have the right to dominate nature (as if we could, actually, dominate nature). It was never a matter of if, only a matter of when. It would be better to make a collective social decision that these kinds of lands are better left undeveloped, for collective recreational use or as wildlife refuges, also to serve as a natural barrier against storms such as this in the future.”

Yes, experts in climate science, alternative technologies and coastal defense are absolutely necessary, but above all the expertise of the experts needs to be at the service of democratic mass institutions of working people and communities at risk. Otherwise, human civilization will go over the “climate cliff” while giant corporations are still figuring out how to mine the ice-free Arctic, expand the tar sands, blow away mountain ranges for coal and shale oil, and extract ever more natural gas with fracking.

Capitalism cannot halt its march to destruction. Even if some of the “one percent” do get it, like NY Mayor Bloomberg when he repudiated Mitt Romney, that doesn’t change the reality. An energy industry in private hands, operating for maximum corporate profit, has become a formula for collective suicide. Breaking that power is the beginning of hope – and a profound transformation of popular consciousness is the first step toward making that possible.

To help promote that process both in our communities and in the socialist movement, members of Solidarity have organized an Eco-socialism Working Group. Our goal – not by ourselves of course, but as part of the growing movement for environmental sanity – is to show why the struggle for socialism and to avoid climate catastrophe is one inseparable whole. It requires — although it’s not limited to — dismantling the arms industry, ending environmental racism, replacing capitalist profit with production for real human need, and a substantial transformation of how we live and work, in ways that only a fundamentally democratic and fully participatory society can hope to achieve. None of this can be achieved overnight, but there really isn’t time to waste.

Solidarity Ecosocialist Commission, November 7, 2012.

P.S.

* <http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/3740>