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Speak Out Now

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Disasters Reveal a Bankrupt Society

The past few weeks have been overwhelming, with hurricanes ripping up entire cities and islands along with the recent devastating earthquakes in Mexico. Even though these disasters have all been acts of nature, their intensity, frequency, and impact on poor and working people are far from natural. The degree of devastation, the pathetic level of government relief, and the misery they've left in their wake have all been unnecessary. These disasters reveal the complete disregard those who run the society have for the lives of working people.

There is no reason hurricanes and earthquakes have to bring about so much destruction. Hurricanes are very predictable – we can know their intensity, their path, and their date of arrival typically days in advance. We have the resources to evacuate entire cities beforehand. With earthquakes there is far less warning time but we could prepare relief efforts in advance, with plenty of supplies and first aid teams ready to go. We have the technology for durable hurricane weather proofing for houses and buildings, and the same goes for constructing buildings far more resistant to earthquakes.

But nothing close to this happens. The big corporations and the wealthy are always protected while the poorest and most vulnerable in society are left to fend for themselves. The callous neglect of our families and our neighborhoods that occurs on a daily basis in this society is only magnified during the aftermath of a disaster. There was no reason ten nursing home residents should have been abandoned to die from the scorching heat following Hurricane Irma in Florida. There is no legitimate rescue effort organized for the poor. Food and medical supplies are not made available to neighborhoods of the working class. The police are ready to criminalize or kill those who are forced to organize our own relief by taking food and supplies from large stores. We are called looters and thieves simply for fighting for our survival.

The devastating recent earthquake in Mexico that killed at least 320 people (as of this writing) tells the same story. Again, the poorest neighborhoods, like in the state of Oaxaca, were left alone and had to organize completely their own search and rescue and relief squads. The government was too busy looking after their corporations in the capital, Mexico City. Who are the thousands who have been left homeless, the neighborhoods without power? It is the poor and working class of Mexico.

Our lives are deemed not important enough to save – to not be rich just means you're not worth it in our society. In fact, the more poor and working class neighborhoods are destroyed by a hurricane or earthquake, the more redevelopment can occur afterwards. For the banks and

corporations and their government, the greater the disaster, the greater the chances to profit from it. In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, when the majority of the island of Puerto Rico has been without power, state officials have ordered electrical workers not to fix the power grid, so the state could more quickly sell off and privatize the entire public power industry. As of this writing, the entire island is still without power, under what's been described as apocalyptic conditions.

None of this is unusual. Twelve years ago, following Hurricane Katrina, we saw the same priorities, protecting the profits of investors and redevelopers while poor and working families were thrown out like refugees or completely abandoned with no relief. It was the same in 2010 after the earthquake in Haiti, when so-called relief only went to turning previous working class neighborhoods into new economic zones for corporate investment by mainly US companies.

And, as usual, it has been the extraordinary efforts of working people in the neighborhoods and surrounding communities that has provided real aid and assistance. People in Mexico have mobilized in the thousands to carefully pick through the rubble to save those who were trapped. Others banded together, cooking massive amounts of food for those working in the relief efforts and those whose homes had been destroyed by the earthquake. It was the same in communities throughout the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico. The "Cajun Navy," made up of anyone with a boat and a heart, got busy ferrying people out of harm's way and bringing food, water and other supplies to those who were stranded.

The politicians show up in whatever outfit they think is appropriate for the occasion, offering words of assurance to those who have lost everything and then disappearing back into their world of power and privilege.

For those who run this society, disasters are just another opportunity to accumulate their wealth by imposing more misery on working people. Natural disasters just reveal how unnatural and bankrupt their capitalist system truly is.

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