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USA

Resisting Capital's Disasters

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As the catastrophes pile up “natural and unnatural” each new one tends to knock the previous out of the news cycle. In the wake of Hurricane Maria’s near-destruction of Puerto Rico, how much endless “breaking news” coverage is left for Florida and Houston after Irma and Harvey? By the time this issue of Against the Current reaches our readers, Puerto Rico and the devastated Caribbean islands may be mostly relegated to the archives by California wildfires and new calamities and scandals. One disaster at a time, if you please!

Each of these appalling events, however, while creating new levels of human misery, also generates whole new opportunities to profit from them. Hurricane Katrina set in motion the dismantling of New Orleans’ public schools and their replacement by corporate charters. In Puerto Rico, rebuilding the destroyed power grid is likely to be a publicly subsidized but private for-profit project. As Congressman Luis Gutierrez aptly put it, the United States “wants to own Puerto Rico,” but not to treat it as part of the U.S. homeland.

Borrowing and expanding author Naomi Klein’s term, we might call all this “disaster capitalism” on steroids. But that evocative term is useful mainly if the emphasis is placed where it belongs, on capitalism, the ultimate disaster facing human civilization.

This is especially important at a time when it appears to many people that the driving force behind current events is the unhinged character of the current U.S. administration and the twit-in-chief at its head. Yes, Donald Trump’s serious personality disorders are an accelerant in the gathering firestorms of war buildups, global chaos and environmental collapse, as is the incapacity of the U.S. political system to control the White House. But the underlying causes run much deeper.

Trump represents the twisted and half-deranged face of a systemic assault on virtually every facet of the social safety net, workers’ rights, and the entire public sector “apart from the bloated permanent war economy. For more than three decades, it’s proceeded under the banner of neoliberalism through administrations of both capitalist parties, even if the current regime of Trump and the far-right Republican Congress are a particularly malignant manifestation.

With Trump’s attacks on health care and women’s rights, the wave of reactionary judicial appointments, threats of war, anti-immigrant raids and deliberate ripping up of environmental regulations coming in waves, it may also seem “appropriating another allusion (from Star Trek) that “resistance is futile.” But it’s not: Recent examples show that human action can put checks on the inhuman workings of an inhuman system and point toward its ultimate replacement.

Resistance Exhibit A: When the latest iteration of the Republican drive to “repeal and replace Obamacare” crashed and burned, it didn’t happen because Senate Democrats spontaneously grew a spine and a few Republicans sprouted a conscience.

Every medical association and health care union came out against this cynical, lying and sadistic effort to gut Medicaid to pay for billionaires’ tax cuts. Disability rights organizations condemned it and staged militant demonstrations. Eighty percent of the U.S. population hated it. Ultimately, popular anger overrode the blackmail of the Crack Brothers and the far-right donors threatening to withhold their filthy money from the 2018 Republican campaigns.

Trump's executive moves to dismantle insurance subsidies and wipe out the protections of the Affordable Care Act will be fought out in the courts and Congress, but rising popular anger and the momentum growing for a single-payer health insurance system will shape the longterm outcome of this protracted struggle.

Resistance Exhibit B: Recipients of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) "facing Trump's threat to strip their protection from deportation and their ability to pursue education and employment" not only refused to slip into the shadows. Mobilizing to protect their families, they angrily confronted the Democratic congressional leadership following Trump's chummy get-together with Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer.

Fears of a "bipartisan" rotten deal to preserve their protection while putting more border patrol agents in immigrant communities "pitting DACA recipients against other vulnerable people" drove them to demonstrative direct action against not only the Trump regime but also their supposed "friends" in the Democratic leadership at Pelosi's press briefing.

Resistance Exhibit C: What began in 2016 as Colin Kaepernick's kneeling protest of racial injustice and murderous police violence has become a mass expression, fueled both by Trump's attack tweets and by still more unpunished police killings of unarmed African Americans.

Resistance Exhibit D: We would be remiss not to mention the labor movement's most successful political mobilization in recent history, when over 300,000 petition signatures in Maryland halted "right-to-work" legislation in the state pending a vote on the November 2018 ballot. ([See Labor Notes](#)).

Criminal Negligence and Fighting Back

What began as Washington's inadequate and fumbling response to Hurricane Maria has devolved into a major case of criminal negligence that threatens the survival of millions of Puerto Ricans. The U.S. military, with its new \$700 billion budget approved by an 89-8 Senate vote (can we please have our gridlock back?), can play a deadly game of chicken flying warplanes on the North Korean coast. But in the critical first week after Hurricane Maria, why wasn't it mobilized to clear the roads and get desperately needed relief to Puerto Rico's stranded communities "or immediately establish emergency medical assistance for thousands of people in danger of dying without it? (See Rafael Bernabe's article in this issue for the background of the crippling of Puerto Rico's finances and economy under U.S. colonial rule, and his account of the hurricane's aftermath posted [here](#). For a scathing critique of Trump's indolent response to the hurricane disaster, see the [New York Daily News](#).)

Trump couldn't resist putting on full display the depths of his racism, lobbing rolls of paper towels into a San Juan audience, and his infantile attention span, announcing that FEMA won't stay on the ground for the long term. It will be the outraged reaction of Puerto Rican communities in the island and the U.S. mainland, and solidarity with them, that will determine how this threat plays out.

Make no mistake, acts of resistance "and of basic human decency" are just the beginning of what will be needed to confront capital's disasters. It's absolutely critical that hundreds of people have poured into the streets of St. Louis in outrage over yet another unpunished police murder "Anthony Lamar Smith gunned down by officer Jason Stockley.

But if president Obama's Justice Department declined to bring federal charges over the killing of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, there is surely no chance of the straight-up racist Sessions/Trump regime doing so in St. Louis or elsewhere. With the U.S. labor movement in its present sad condition unable to respond to these crimes, that job is left to the grassroots communities of color and anti-racist allies.

As for the Republican defund-and-destroy-Obamacare crusade, like Dracula it will rise again, both in the forthcoming budget battles and over Trump's executive order to cancel federal subsidies for insurance. Bernie Sanders' Medicare-for-all (single payer) Senate bill with its unprecedented 16 sponsors is a welcome development, and a sign of a rapidly growing movement. But right now, will it serve the Democrat leadership as a wedge issue to force a serious ongoing debate – or mainly a marketing promotion to hold their disillusioned progressive voting base in line for the 2018 midterm election season?

The anger and loathing in the first nine months of the Trump nightmare have staved off some of his worst agenda items – and these are not small achievements.

Spontaneous mass outpourings at airports killed the first attempt at Trump's Muslim travel ban. After Charlottesville popular outrage, mass mobilizations and physical resistance have largely replaced the fascist "white nationalist" big show with small turnouts of ratlike neo-nazis huddling behind protective police lines.

Support for Trump has pretty much shrunk toward its irreducible hardcore base. There is no need to dwell on what the broad public knows, and the Republican leadership better than anyone – that Trump's behavior is unlikely ever to be "normalized," and that his affinity for dictators and thugs on the global stage is embarrassing even by the usual cynical norms of imperial conduct.

Whether Donald Trump might actually need a war or near-war to salvage his ill-gotten presidency, and how far he might be allowed to push the crisis with North Korea or Iran, is a truly scary question. (A statement "No Trump, No War, No Way" from Solidarity, the organization sponsoring Against the Current, is posted [at](#).)

Forcing the Issue

None of these considerations, important as they are, contradict the deeper reality that U.S. society and human civilization are being hammered by one disaster after another – calamities fundamentally driven by capitalist production, accumulation and politics.

How many years have seen three consecutive monster storms like Harvey, Irma and Maria? Ten hurricanes and counting, for the first time since 1893, are only the Atlantic Basin side of the story. One-third of the country of Bangladesh, as well as big areas of India and Nepal, went underwater from monsoon rains that went way out of control, severely affecting more than 40 million people and directly killing over 1200. (<http://wxch.nl/2ewb1KT>)

The physics of the situation are not esoteric. Ocean waters are much warmer than historically normal, fueling the ferocity of storms. Warmer air holds more moisture, leading to massive increases in rainfall amounts and intensity. And in the case of Harvey, persistent high pressure to the north – a product of anomalies in jet stream currents keeping weather patterns in place longer than usual – kept the storm lingering over Houston, then back into the Gulf of Mexico for yet another landfall and enhanced havoc.

One might think that the impact on popular consciousness of such successive apocalyptic events should be cumulative. But high-level editorial decisions must have been taken not only at Fox News but at the "liberal" CNN and MSNBC and the "neutral" Weather Channel, that "climate change" was not to be seriously discussed in the storm coverage, and if anyone mentioned it, quickly brushed aside as inappropriate or insensitive.

Climate chaos will produce ever more brutal tropical storm seasons and at the same time, more horrific wildfire seasons in the U.S. and Canadian West, less and thinner Arctic sea ice, permafrost melting and resulting methane

releases, and other effects including accelerating northward movement of tropical parasites and the pace of species extinctions.

The only way of breaking this logjam is by powerful global environmental movements, rooted in the most heavily impacted communities and indigenous peoples' struggles, that force the issue – as the magnificent mobilization against the Dakota Access Pipeline did this past year. Those fights don't always win, but they put the crisis on the public agenda.

Not every ugly and tragic deportation can be blocked – most can't, while the forces of racism and reaction hold power. Not every act of murderous police violence can be prosecuted – few will be, even when Democrats hold office, let alone the likes of Jeff Sessions. Not every ecocidal oil pipeline and fracking well can be stopped.

But they all must be protested, and called out for the racist and corporate crimes that they are. And the various protest movements – as they increasingly recognize, whether they're about the planet or police or Palestine – must find ways to act together and in solidarity. The struggle to understand what our movements share in common is the necessary beginning of what's needed to attack the root causes of capital's spreading disasters.

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