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Anger boils over at lack of US storm relief

By Fred Mazelis
3 November 2012

With the death toll from Hurricane Sandy climbing towards 100, and several million people in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut facing a fifth day without electricity, heat and, in many cases, food and water, anger and frustration has boiled over at the failure of the federal, state and local governments to provide adequate relief.

The storm, like Hurricane Katrina seven years ago, has laid bare the immense social inequalities that saturate every facet of American society, nowhere more starkly than in New York City, among the hardest hit areas on the US Eastern Seaboard.

Discontent among residents of the city's predominantly working class outer boroughs as well as of those in public housing developments in lower Manhattan has grown daily, with many charging that those who run the city were concerned only with the needs of Manhattan's stock brokers and multi-millionaires and had no problem seeing working class and poor people living in hunger, cold and darkness for days on end.

These popular sentiments—and the concerns that they had provoked within ruling circles—broke to the surface of political events Friday night with the sudden announcement by the office of billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg that the city's annual New York City Marathon scheduled for Sunday, November 4 had been cancelled for the first time in 40 years.

A statement issued jointly by City Hall and the New York Road Runners club stated: "The marathon has always brought our city together and inspired us with stories of courage and

determination. We would not want a cloud to hang over the race or its participants, and so we have decided to cancel it.”

The announcement came just hours after Bloomberg had held a press conference at City Hall insisting that the marathon would go on and would not divert any resources from providing relief to the victims of the storm. While discussing how restaurants that he frequents were just as full as ever and selling even more wine, he insisted that the race would “give people something to cheer about.” He invoked as a precedent the decision of his predecessor, Rudy Giuliani, to hold the marathon in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

Outrage had quickly built amid news reports that generators were being set up in Central Park to power media tents and other amenities for the runners, while food and water was being trucked in for them as well. Meanwhile, in the city’s public housing, residents were forced to fill jugs and buckets from fire hydrants and lug them up as many as 17 floors.

No such resources as those made available for the Marathon were provided to city hospitals forced to shut down and evacuate their patients under dangerous conditions for lack of generators, or to the many thousands of residents of devastated neighborhoods in Staten Island, the Rockaway section of Queens, Coney Island in Brooklyn and elsewhere. In these areas, people have been left stranded amid devastation, without means of transportation or communication.

Residents in Staten Island, the borough where the New York Marathon was set to start and where the majority of the city’s over 41 storm fatalities have taken place, put up a hand-lettered sign reading “F.U. Mayor and your Marathon.” People standing on long lines waiting for food and water from FEMA erupted in anger against Bloomberg and the subordination of the relief efforts to the interests of the most privileged layers of society.

While some 40,000 people had reportedly already come to the city to participate in Sunday’s marathon, approximately a third of them from other countries, opposition to holding the race surfaced among the runners themselves.

Penny Krakoff, a social worker from Crown Heights, Brooklyn who was set to participate in the marathon, wrote, “I cannot start a 26.2 mile run in Staten Island—people are missing, stranded, in need of resources. Brooklyn and Queens have equal devastation. Parts of Manhattan are without electricity, water, major hospitals are closed.”

She said she would catch the marathon bus to the starting point at the Staten Island end of the Verrazano Bridge on Sunday, where she would turn in her official bib and instead volunteer and gather resources to help the people suffering in that borough, the hardest hit by the storm. Other runners promised to break off from the race at different parts of the city to deliver supplies to areas without power.

City sanitation workers, who have been putting in shifts of 12 hours and more, also protested at being assigned to clean up after the marathon rather than participating in the recovery work in Staten Island, Brooklyn and Queens, where many of them live.

A Staten Island hotel manager announced that he would not honor 160 advance reservations from marathon runners, as rooms were already occupied by some 700 people made homeless by the storm.

Meanwhile, a number of city Democratic politicians, some of them seeking to run to succeed Bloomberg as mayor, voiced opposition to the decision to go ahead with the race and there were suggestions within the financial press that ING, the Dutch-based investment bank that sponsors the marathon, was beginning to see the bitter denunciations of the marathon as a “branding disaster.”

Underlying these concerns are real fears within ruling circles that the deprivation caused by Hurricane Sandy and its illumination of the stark divide between New York’s financial aristocracy and the city’s working class majority could lead to social upheavals.

Anger has also erupted in other areas of the East Coast. In Bridgeport, Connecticut’s largest and one of its poorest cities, United Illuminating crews were pelted with eggs by residents amid charges that the electrical utility had concentrated its efforts on restoring electricity to Connecticut’s wealthy suburban communities at Bridgeport’s expense. The electrical firm pulled its crews out of the city, demanding greater police protection.

The feeling of millions that they have been abandoned in the face of the disaster is well-founded. After barely two days of Obama making ritualistic speeches about “neighbors helping neighbors” and Romney staging phony food drives, the campaigns returned to their normal lies as both big business parties prepare for far deeper attacks on the working class after the election is over. Bloomberg took time out to endorse Obama, whom he sees as a faithful defender of his and his fellow billionaires’ interests.

The class divide in New York found glaring expression in the ability of the New York Stock Exchange to open for business on Wednesday morning, just hours after Bellevue Hospital, also in the area that had suffered the loss of electricity, was forced to evacuate more than 700 patients under dangerous conditions because of a lack of power. One doctor told the *New York Times* that water could be heard pouring through the elevators “like Niagara running through the hospital. The phones didn’t work. We lost all communications between floors. We were in the dark all night. No water to wash hands—I mean, we’re doctors!”

Mass transit and electricity has returned only slowly to the New York-New Jersey area four days after Hurricane Sandy made landfall. Most of Lower Manhattan had power restored by late Friday, but many thousands of families in the outer boroughs and in other areas of New York and New Jersey will have to wait at least another week, if not until the end of November, to have their electricity back. Temperatures are dipping down into the 30s, with a real threat that the death toll from the storm will be augmented by more deaths caused by government and corporate negligence and criminality.

The latest estimates of economic damages from the storm were some \$50 billion, double what had been estimated a few days earlier. It is believed that only about one-third of losses will be covered by insurance. The estimate places Hurricane Sandy among the most destructive storms

in US history, and significant additional losses would bring it close to the devastation of Katrina, which caused \$157 billion in damages.