CLASS AND CATASTROPHE: SEPTEMBER 11 AND OTHER WORKING-CLASS DISASTERS

Introduction

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The terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 set off huge global processes that are still unfolding. Terrorism has been placed on the center stage of world diplomacy, international political configurations have been realigned, and a war in Afghanistan has toppled the government. Within the United States, everything from security arrangements to budget priorities to the cultural mood have been transformed. But the September events had a local dimension too: New York and Washington, D.C. experienced them as immediate, horrendous disasters.

The attack on the World Trade Center was the worst catastrophe in the history of the New York City. Some 2,800 people, from every social class, died there, from the executive director of the Port Authority, which owned the Trade Center, to managing directors of major financial firms, to undocumented immigrants holding low-paid service jobs. But the working class was particularly hard hit. Though no systematic analysis of who was killed on September 11 has yet been undertaken, it is clear that ordinary working people made up a large proportion of the victims. According to the American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), 633 of its members perished.[1] No doubt several times that number of non-union workers died.

The September 11 attacks were singular events in the technology of terror employed, the nature of the targets, and the social shock they caused in the United States and throughout the world. Yet as catastrophes for particular populations the attacks were not without precedent. In the recent and distant past, disasters, both man-made and natural, have devastated working people throughout the world, in some cases causing far more deaths than on September 11.

International Labor and Working-Class History, in an effort to understand and memorialize the September events, asked a group of scholars to write about various disasters which have struck the poor and working classes. We believe that placing the events of September 11 in this historic context will help us think more broadly and deeply about their meaning. It also raises many questions about the significance of catastrophe in labor and working-class history generally.

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Disasters have a way of suddenly reordering social and cultural hierarchies. The attack on the World Trade Center, less than three miles from the ILWCH office, brought New York workers into greater local and national prominence than they had had in a generation. First came recognition of the heroism and sacrifice of the initial rescue workers: firefighters, police officers, and emergency medical technicians. Their brave and dutiful acts brought into question the dominant social values that had prevailed prior to September 11. In an extraordinary essay in *BusinessWeek,* entitled "Real Masters of the Universe," Bruce Nussbaum wrote that:

> . . . on the day of the World Trade Center cataclysm, the country changed. Big, beefy working-class guys became heroes once again, replacing the telegenic financial analysts and techno-billionaires who once had held the nation in thrall . . . Maybe it was the class reversals that were so revealing. Men and women making forty grand a year working for the city responding—risking their own lives—to save investment bankers and traders making 10 times that amount . . . At least once, . . . we should look at what the rescuers are teaching us, about what matters—and who.

As construction and other blue-collar workers joined firefighters in the rescue and recovery effort, they, too, won widespread praise. Verlyn Klinkenborg wrote in *The New York Times Magazine* that:

> What New York has witnessed is a form of sudden social triage. A city of unsoiled and unroughened hands has learned to love a class of laborers it once tried hard not to notice.[2]

Inadvertently, the September 11 hijackers peeled off the facade of New York's social structure, revealing the centrality of the working class, and its internal patterning. The "Big, beefy working-class guys" Nussbaum and so many others celebrated represented a particular fraction of New York workers, overwhelmingly male, white, and Catholic, and heavily Irish. In a city of dazzling ethnic and national variety, the September 11 events made evident how unrepresentative the city's uniformed services had remained, particularly the fire department.[3]

While the rescue worker victims revealed the continuing importance of "old immigrants," who had been consigned by many to the oblivion of the past or the obscurity of the unchic, other victims came from newer social strata. The heart-wrenching flyers, posted around the city in the days after September 11 by friends and relatives seeking to find missing persons, testified to the extraordinary range of national backgrounds and occupations among the dead and injured. As would be expected, many worked for brokerage houses, insurance companies, and other financial firms in managerial, professional, and clerical positions. But a surprising number did manual labor. Seventy-three employees of

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Windows on the World, the restaurant at the top of the Trade Center's north tower, died. Most of these cooks, bartenders, waiters, cleaners, cashiers, and caterers were immigrants, coming from some two dozen countries, in some cases quite recently. Scores of building service workers, who ran elevators and cleaned offices, and construction workers, engaged in renovation projects, also died. Even among the brokerage workers, many, far from being mega-rich, were young traders and technicians, the grunts of the world capital markets. Some came from abroad. Others came from the same neighborhoods or even the same families as the rescue workers, the upwardly mobile children and siblings of firefighters, policemen, and other civil servants. A surprising number still lived with their parents.[4]

As the articles that follow show, disaster-caused changes in the social visibility and valuation of workers can have very varied long-term effects. The aftermaths of disasters are influenced less by the extent of the tragedies as by the political contexts in which they occur. The lasting political impact of September 11 within the United States remains uncertain.

In the days and months after September 11, it appeared that the political dominance of big business and the corporate appropriation of public resources for private purposes, which characterized the United States during the 1980s and 1990s, would continue unabated. In a stunning demonstration of greed and know-how, the major airlines rushed through Congress a bill that gave them fifteen billion dollars in grants and loan guarantees but appropriated no money at all for the tens of thousands of airline workers facing imminent layoffs. When New York Governor George Pataki established a commission to take charge of rebuilding Lower Manhattan, much of which will be done with government money, he appointed a former Wall Street executive and State Department official to head the body, and filled it largely with business leaders (which meant that white men occupied most of the seats). Organized labor—with well over a million members in New York City—got only one representative, the head of the local building and construction trades council, whose concerns generally have been with ensuring that union labor be employed in recovery and reconstruction work, rather than with the broader economic and social issues at stake.[5]

However, the story is not yet over. If workers and organized labor in general remain marginal to political decision making about the September 11 aftermath, one group that overlaps with them has demonstrated considerable social clout, the families of the victims. When New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani tried to reduce the number of firefighters involved in the effort to recover bodies at the World Trade Center site, the families of missing firefighters forced him to reverse course. Similarly, firefighter widows stopped Giuliani's plan to move relief money given to a city-sponsored fund into a private foundation that he would control for years after leaving office. The moral claims of the victims' families may yet give them significant influence over the ultimate disposition of the sixteen acres of land in the heart of the financial district where the twin towers

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stood. Working people may gain some social power out of the calamity of September 11, but as bearers and symbols of grief, rather than as a result of their position in the economic and social structure.

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Comparative history can help us understand the experience that New Yorkers have and will be going through. Given the long lead time required for the production of *ILWCH* issues, the authors of the articles that follow had only a few weeks to prepare their contributions. In most cases, these are not full-length, monographic articles, but rather shorter essays that use particular cases to reflect on the dynamics of disasters and their impact on working-class life and politics. Some of the articles deal with natural disasters and others with those made by man. These two classes of catastrophe obviously differ, yet the boundary between them is not as sharp as it might seem. For one thing, the impact of disasters, whether natural or man-made, depends in part on the nature of the social, political, and built environment of the places hit. For another thing, the needs created by disasters and the responses to them are often similar, regardless of their origin. Thus both types of events raise similar questions that the articles in this issue consider: How do disasters change class relations? How do they mobilize and demobilize popular movements? How do they transform the relationship between the local and the national, between the state and the populace? What are the politics of relief and reconstruction? How does the meaning of heroism get defined? How is disaster remembered?

The opening article, by Richard Greenwald, is a highly personal reflection on the World Trade Center attack by a labor historian who grew up and still lives in one of New York City's many working-class districts. His discussion of the communal suffering caused by the calamity serves to keep in the foreground the human particularity of disaster, even as we try to understand the broader social dynamics at work.

The next four articles look at disasters elsewhere. Geoffrey Field examines the World War II blitz in London, an experience that on September 11 flashed through the minds of many New Yorkers seeking a precedent for the survival of a city in the face of awful adversity. Field reconstructs the experience of Londoners who sought protection in underground tube stations and other mass shelters, how their experience was represented in popular media and artistic expression, and how it changed British politics.

Mark Alan Healey looks at the 1944 earthquake that destroyed the Argentinean city of San Juan. He shows how the relief and reconstruction effort launched the national political career of Juan Peron and made working-class populism a powerful force in Argentina ever since, but also marginalized San Juan itself from the new political and social dynamic. No such political break followed the 1976 earthquake in Guatemala. Deborah Levenson documents popular mobilization in the face of trauma, but shows how the military, which already dominated national life, used the recovery effort to co-opt and eliminate

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opponents and bolster its power. Meanwhile, national and international aid agencies, seeking a technological fix to earthquake vulnerability, displaced the traditional vernacular building style by introducing imported materials ill-suited to local conditions, the most lasting legacy of the shaking of the earth.

Probably few New Yorkers thought about Bhopal, India on September 11. Yet the industrial accident that occurred there in December 1984, the worst in history, was one of the few man-made urban disasters on a scale similar to the World Trade Center collapse (not counting bombing raids during all-out war). Chandana Mathur and Ward Morehouse document the causes and horrendous impact of the Bhopal gas leak, and trace the complex legal and political maneuvers that led to a settlement of damage claims and liabilities that seems utterly inadequate in the face of the suffering caused by corporate negligence.

Our last articles bring us back to New York. Daniel Levinson Wilk traces how, for three-quarters of a century, notions of heroism were intertwined with the struggle for union representation by building service workers. Like Field, he shows the importance of popular representation in defining political parameters and recounts a largely successful effort by workers to culturally reposition themselves. Michael Spear looks at New York City's fiscal crisis of the 1970s as a precedent for the financial crisis Gotham now faces in the aftermath of September 11. Spear details the central role public employee unions played in the earlier crisis, which led to a dramatic shift of power away from the working class, and compares the current circumstances and prospects to those a quarter century ago. Finally, Gregory Umbach describes two rich sources for the comparative study of New York disasters, websites sponsored by the American Social History Project and its partners. One is dedicated to presenting an array of primary documents concerning past New York disasters, from riots to blizzards to factory fires. The other is a digital archive of September 11, which recognizes the importance of preserving electronic and other new media forms of communication, documentation, and memorial.

The editors of *ILWCH* would like to thank all of the contributors for their extraordinary efforts to make this collection of articles possible. We hope it marks the beginning of an ongoing discussion of the meaning of disaster in labor history. We also hope that in a modest way it helps us better understand the terrible events we have lived through.

NOTES

1. The AFL-CIO figure, cited in *On Campus* [American Federation of Teachers], Feb. 2002, includes deaths at the Pentagon and from the Pennsylvania air crash as well as in New York.

2. Bruce Nussbaum, "Real Masters of the Universe," *BusinessWeek,* Oct. 1, 2001; *The New York Times Magazine,* Sept. 30, 2001. I discussed some of these issues in "Working-Class Heroes," *The Nation,* Nov. 12, 2001, from which this introduction draws.

3. Perhaps embarrassed by this, when the fire department commissioned a statue to honor its 343 members who died at the Trade Center, it used as a model the celebrated photograph of three firefighters raising the American flag over the ground zero rubble, but planned to have one firefighter depicted as white, one as black, and one as Hispanic, when in reality all three

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had been white. A storm of protest by firefighters, outraged less at the ethno-politics of the gesture than at the historical falsification it entailed, scuttled the plan. See *The Chief,* Jan. 25, 2002. A photograph of the proposed memorial appeared in *The New York Times,* Jan. 20, 2002, section IV.

4. The *New York Times* mini-biographies of the September 11 victims, "Portraits in Grief," in addition to being a moving memorial, provide an invaluable look at the social makeup of the dead. Other newspapers, including *Newsday,* ran similar series. Many union newspapers and periodicals detailed the losses of particular unions. See, for example, *Connections* [Working for America Institute, AFL-CIO], Dec. 2001, for the Windows of the World employees; Jack Newfield, "Honor the sacrifices of union members," *Public Employee Press* [District Council 37, AFSCME], Nov. 2001, for New York unionists in general; and the AFL-CIO website (http://www.aflcio.org/Sept_11/news.htm) for a breakdown of casualties by national union affiliation. For a fine discussion of the heavy representation of Irish-Americans among both rescue and brokerage workers, and the connections between the two, see Jim Dwyer, "Sonuvagun, If It Isn't Dominion," *The New York Times Magazine,* Nov. 11, 2001.

5. William Greider, "Not Wanted: Enron Democrats," *The Nation,* Apr. 8, 2002; *The New York Times,* Nov. 30, 2001.

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