

The Florida tornado deaths: Not by nature's hand alone

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The terrible loss of life inflicted by the tornadoes that devastated central Florida earlier this week evoked a typical response from the establishment media: sensational accounts of carnage and destruction, interviews with tearful survivors, empty declarations of sympathy from politicians.

Predictably, Bill Clinton arrived for a photo op. He toured the tornado-damaged areas for three hours, offering survivors hugs and biblical quotations, before jetting off San Francisco to attend two political fundraisers.

What all of the press accounts lack is any serious examination of the context in which this tragedy took place. Despite the substantial media coverage, one question has not been asked. How is it possible that despite all the advances in technology thousands of people were left defenseless and unprepared for such an event?

The damage was appalling. Homes were ripped to pieces and scattered over such a wide area that the recovery of bodies took several days. House trailers flipped over and piled one on top of the other. A man sitting in a mobile home had an 18-month-old child ripped out of his arms. Teams of trained dogs had to be brought in to locate bodies buried in the rubble. All told 38 died, more than 260 were injured and some 1,000 homes and businesses were destroyed or severely damaged.

One rescuer described the scene at a trailer park: "We got here and branched out throughout the park, it was chaos. There were mobile homes on top of mobile homes. People were just dazed and walking around aimlessly. They kept saying, 'Help me, help me.' Most died from blunt trauma. Human bodies are just not designed to withstand this."

Such carnage might be understandable in a long

bygone era or in a poverty stricken and undeveloped part of the world, but in the United States on the eve of the twenty-first century?

The attitude of the political establishment and news media to this latest tragedy was summed up by Kissimmee, Florida Mayor Frank Attkisson, who stated. "Who can prepare for a tornado with 200 mile winds that comes over in the course of 30 seconds?" In other words, the tornado deaths were due to a fluke of nature that no one could have anticipated or prevented.

This is rubbish. Florida officials had every reason to expect and anticipate such an event. Florida is an area of the country notorious for violent weather. Only a few years ago Hurricane Andrew left thousands homeless in south Florida. Over the past several months Florida has been hit by an unusual number of storms spawned by the El Nino weather phenomenon. Meteorologists have been warning of unstable weather conditions for the better part of a year.

As in the case of Hurricane Andrew, the poor quality of home construction in working class areas hit by high winds played a large factor in the wholesale character of the destruction. One fact noted by the media, but not dwelled upon, is that the bulk of the fatalities caused by the tornado occurred among residents of trailer parks, whose homes proved little more than deathtraps. In many cases they were blown off their foundations and hurled hundreds of yards. Yet increasing numbers of young workers and retirees in Florida, as across the United States, are being forced by economic pressures into these flimsy structures, vulnerable to flood, wind and fire.

While Florida faces some of the most powerful storms to hit the continental US, the homes built in it for working people are notoriously insubstantial. The typical home in a working class neighborhood is a one-

story wooden frame dwelling. Only 3 percent of houses in Florida have basements, a place of relative safety in case of tornadoes.

Other factors served to magnify the death toll. Because of cost considerations, most Florida cities have not taken basic safety precautions. None of the affected communities had a tornado warning system, sirens and loudspeakers that can alert residents to take cover. Since the recent tornadoes struck in the middle of the night, when most people were in bed, such an alert system could have saved many lives.

Furthermore, local and state authorities have done little to prepare for such disasters, either by educating the public on the danger of tornadoes or prescribing safety standards for homes and housing complexes. None of the trailer parks destroyed by the tornadoes had underground shelters for residents to take refuge.

The tornado death toll demonstrates that something is desperately wrong in Florida. As in America as a whole, society is divided into two worlds. Behind the facade of a prosperous and booming economy there lies a world of hard-pressed working people forced into an increasingly substandard existence.

In recent years scenes of devastation such as in central Florida have become a familiar occurrence. It is not so much that the weather is getting worse, but that larger and larger numbers of working people are being denied the elementary necessity of good quality housing, despite the great advances in technology.

This state of affairs provokes no notice among the politicians and big business media, let alone proposals for a remedy. Their silence is another indication of the determination of corporate America, given the extraordinary level of social polarization in this country, to suppress any serious discussion of social issues.



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