

Cold snap cuts water, power to thousands in US

Naomi Spencer
19 January 2009

Over the last week, record-breaking low temperatures and heavy snow have crippled a vast area of the US. Particularly hard-hit have been the Midwest and Northeast, where the impact of extreme cold is compounded by budgetary shortfalls, distressed infrastructure, and an unraveling social safety net for the poor.

Early in the week, the National Weather Service reported that large portions of the upper Midwest experienced double-digit below zero temperatures, with wind chills approaching minus 58 degrees Fahrenheit (-50 degrees Celsius). Many Southern states were ill prepared for single-digit temperatures and snowfall as the cold front moved eastward.

At least nine deaths have been attributed to the cold, including two handicapped men who became incapacitated in the snow and an elderly homeless man who was sleeping in his car. Snow and ice have also contributed to numerous fatal highway accidents, including at least two in Ohio and two in Indiana Wednesday.

The impact of the cold on virtually every aspect of day-to-day life underscores the deterioration of the country's basic physical and social infrastructure. Thousands of flights are cancelled and delayed; tow barges are stalled and stranded on major Midwestern waterways; overwhelmed homeless shelters have no choice but to turn people away. As with the flooding and hurricanes of last summer, the present spate of bad weather has so overpowered the functioning of society that masses of people are thrown into conditions considered "Third World."

Aging water lines in cities including Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Washington DC have burst from the cold, cutting water to hundreds of thousands. Some 90,000 residents in the DC area were left without water on Saturday after more than 20 water mains broke. The breaks forced road closures and evacuations of some healthcare facilities. On Sunday, a water line break in Akron, Ohio, resulted in flooding and forced evacuations in a children's hospital emergency room and intensive care unit. A number of Philadelphia water lines, some well over a century old, likewise burst, cutting water and causing icing over city streets.

Power outages have also hit neighborhoods in numerous cities. Thousands of Des Moines and Cedar Rapids, Iowa residents were left without power Friday after the cold and ice damaged aging circuit switches and snapped power lines.

Urban working class households, including thousands who have had their utilities or gas shut off, have been struggling to keep warm in inefficient, aging buildings. The *Chicago Tribune* reported January 16 that on Tuesday and Wednesday, hundreds of desperate city residents lodged complaints for poorly heated apartment buildings.

The *Tribune* noted that last week inspectors from the city's Buildings Department identified some 1,100 apartment buildings that were not being adequately heated by landlords. Some poor tenants were resorting to warming themselves with open ovens and other dangerous means.

The bad weather has contributed to scores of serious

traffic accidents. Many state and municipal governments were so strained by major budget shortfalls and soaring global commodities and shipping prices earlier in 2008 that they were unable to procure adequate stocks of road salt. After a series of snowfalls in December, a number of cities now risk running out before spring. As a result, some highway departments have been stretching stocks by treating roadways with sand or beet juice and salt mixtures, or salting less frequently. In some regions, where the temperatures are too low for salt to have an effect, highway managers have simply closed roads.

The poor road conditions and cold have forced schools throughout Iowa, Michigan, Illinois, Ohio, and New York to close. One Champaign, Illinois school official explained to the Associated Press January 16 that children would suffer from prolonged exposure trying to get to school if they remained open: “They’re waiting 30 minutes at a bus stop; there’s the fear of frostbite and hypothermia... We also have more children walking to school without adequate outerwear.”

Thousands of homeless people throughout the country sleep out of doors, while emergency shelters, including converted jails and gymnasiums lined with mats or blankets, are crowded full. Some cities, including St. Louis, Missouri, Philadelphia, and Washington DC, have opened public hotlines for passersby to report homeless individuals left out on the streets.

Some shelters around the country, already over capacity, have organized volunteer patrols of city streets and bridges to search for people caught outside and distribute such provisions as bundles of firewood or water.

The St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* reported January 16 that a growing majority of the homeless in the city were women or single-mother families—a trend directly linked to the home foreclosure crisis and mounting unemployment. “We see more and more of these people who have slipped through the cracks,” one homeless shelter volunteer told the paper Friday. “The main mission is to just make sure people don’t freeze to death,” a social worker on patrol said.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact