

Cold snap in Europe takes hundreds of lives

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Hundreds of people have died as a result of an extended wave of cold weather across much of Europe. Many of the victims are among the homeless, the mentally ill and the infirm, who are forced to live in poverty.

The freezing temperatures have served to highlight the sharp decline in social conditions in Europe.

With much of Europe covered in a blanket of snow and ice, temperatures have plummeted, with some countries and regions witnessing sub-zero temperatures not seen since the 1940s. In Norway, a temperature of -45.6 Celsius was recorded on January 7. Even in the UK, temperatures have fallen to below -20 Celsius in some areas. Heavy snowfall has been recorded as far south as Spain.

The harsh weather has revealed the huge under-investment in infrastructure and contingency planning that has taken place as part of the assault on social spending by every government across the continent.

Many of the weather-related deaths have occurred in Poland, where, as of last week, a reported 139 people had died. The victims included pensioners and many homeless people, as temperatures dropped towards -20 Celsius. According to one report, at least 42 mostly homeless people died over the weekend of December 18-19.

As of December 22, a reported 27 people had died of hypothermia in Ukraine. By the same date, 11 people had died due to the cold in Romania and 12 in the Czech Republic.

In the Polish, Czech and German regions that make up Silesia, a reported 14,000 people were still without electricity this week.

The heavy concentration of deaths in the former Stalinist countries of Eastern Europe is a grisly commentary on the social devastation that continues to afflict this region two decades after the reintroduction of capitalist market relations.

In France, the icy weather has even affected regions in the normally warmer Mediterranean regions in the south. So far, two homeless people are reported to have died in that country.

Some 2 million people were left without electricity last Monday after the French national power company cut off their service, saying it could not cope with the demand. In addition, around 15,000 homes in the southern city of Arles lost their power supply following the collapse of electricity lines.

At least seven people died in Germany in the week prior to New Year's Day. One of these was a 77-year-old mentally ill woman who froze to death.

In Britain, which already has the highest incidence of winter-related deaths in Europe, particularly among elderly people, it is estimated that the cold weather will kill up to 40,000 people this year. The charity Age Concern has called on the government to increase its cold weather payments to the elderly, as they fall well short of the amount needed to pay prohibitive heating bills.

Among those on welfare benefits who can claim it, a small cold weather payment of £25 is available, but only when the temperature falls below 0 Celsius for seven consecutive days. Many people on welfare are not entitled to claim even this amount.

Thousands of European flights have been cancelled and delayed over recent weeks and many airports have been closed. Train networks and major roads have also been severely affected, with many of them impassable. Thousands of people have found themselves trapped overnight in their cars on motorways due to snow and ice bringing them to a standstill.

Just a few weeks after five stalled Eurostar trains trapped thousands of passengers in the Channel Tunnel between France and England in the run-up to Christmas, yet another train carrying 256 passengers broke down for more than an hour on January 7, causing major delays.

The cold weather has revealed the depths of the collapse in basic infrastructure maintenance in the UK. In the last week, Prime Minister Gordon Brown was forced to hold a meeting with the national emergency committee, Cobra. Such has been the gridlock caused by failed transport routes that millions of people, up to half the national workforce, have been unable to get to work on some days.

More than 14,000 trains were cancelled in Britain from Monday to Friday last week. Eight major A-roads and two sections of motorway were officially closed at some point during the last week. Hundreds of smaller roads remain ungritted and impassable. Neither have the majority of side roads and pavements leading to residential housing been gritted.

In Sussex, Kent and Surrey about 5,000 homes were left without electricity for days while 20,000 homes experienced power cuts across southern England on January 6.

Up to 10,000 schools have had to close nationally on some days. Hospitals have been inundated with patients who have slipped and fallen on ungritted roads and pavements, and several hospitals have had to cancel non-urgent services, including treatment of cardiology outpatients and antenatal patients.

Within a few days of last week's snowfall, it was apparent that many local authorities were running out of grit to treat icy roads. Scarborough council on the east coast of England had to resort to using sand from the beach.

The UK is reliant on two main suppliers—Salt Union and Cleveland Potash—which produce almost 90 percent of the rock salt used to grit roads. Even working 24 hours a day, seven days a week, the mines can only supply 30,000 tonnes a week, a fraction of what is now currently needed. Councils are currently using 60,000 tonnes per day.

Purchasing the salt in winter has also vastly increased the cost of the commodity, payable by taxpayers. According to the *Independent*, "The cost per ton is likely to have matched the £150 to £200 a ton it hit during last February's cold snap, which compares with normal prices of £30 to £40 per ton."

There is evidence that the government ignored the findings of a report issued in August by the national- and local-government-run Roads Liaison Group, which warned of the dangers of councils not having enough stores of rock salt, and made 19 recommendations. The government responded to the report only in December, and recommended that councils should have just six days worth of salt available.

In response to the developing crisis, the government was forced to create an ad hoc body, Salt Cell. Such is the scarcity of salt that it asked the Highways Agency to cut the amount used on road gritting by 25 percent. Another decision was to stop treating the hard shoulders on motorways.

These moves, which will further endanger public safety,

were opposed by road user groups. Automobile Association (AA) spokesman Paul Watters said of the decision, "We are now entering a territory where previously 'safe' roads are not going to be gritted. The fear is that the stagnation will spread to more major routes including trunk roads and motorways if the cold weather continues."

Watters also revealed that local councils had reduced salt stocks by 250,000 tonnes during the past 10 years, and that the AA had raised their concerns over low stocks of salt with the Local Government Association before Christmas.

The cold weather has also revealed the perilous state of the UK's gas supplies. The National Grid has been forced to issue three "gas balancing alerts" in the last week, warning that demand for gas was outstripping supply. The last of these was made just hours after the prime minister had said that "plenty" of gas was available.

On January 7, the National Grid reduced supplies to nearly 100 factories, including Vauxhall's car plant at Ellesmere Port on Merseyside and British Sugar's refineries at Bury St. Edmunds and Newar. These factories had entered into "interruptible supply" contracts, meaning that in exchange for cheaper tariffs, they can be cut off when necessitated. Following the cut-offs, it was widely reported that they were imposed in order that domestic households not be cut off instead.

That such a precarious situation exists is an indictment of the Labour government and its wholesale embrace of the free market. In the UK, energy supplies have long been privatised and deregulated, laying the basis for the current crisis in gas supply. According to estimates, the UK has storage capacity for just 16 days worth of gas, compared with 100 in Germany and 120 in France.



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