

# The Joplin, Missouri tornado

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Another disaster has struck an impoverished region of the United States. The death toll from Sunday's tornado, which tore up a large portion of Joplin, Missouri, now stands at 124, and will almost certainly rise much higher, with 1,500 people still unaccounted for. It already stands as the deadliest single tornado in the United States since 1947.

With tornado season still in its early months, 2011 already ranks as one of the deadliest years in the history of the country. At least 487 have been killed so far, the most since 1936, before the introduction of tornado warning systems. Even as rescue teams searched through the rubble of collapsed houses and buildings on Tuesday, the region braced for new and even bigger storms.

Several factors have combined to produce this catastrophe. There is, first of all, the number and size of the tornadoes themselves. April saw 875 confirmed tornadoes, triple the previous high for that month. This included a massive outbreak late in the month that stretched across the South and Midwest, killing 325 people in six states. With about 1,000 reported tornadoes so far this year, 2011 is on target to exceed the previous record of 1,817 set in 2004.

The intensity of this year's tornado season, coming at the same time as historic floods have engulfed the Mississippi River, may be related to climate change. Scientists have predicted that increased greenhouse gases will not only warm the atmosphere, but also produce sharp climate shifts, including the increased frequency and intensity of storm systems.

As in every disaster of this character, however, the natural element intersects with social conditions. Both in the destructive impact of the storms, and the desperation left behind afterwards, the tornado outbreak in the US this year once again exposes the consequences of inequality, the underdeveloped state of social infrastructure, and the paltry character of government assistance.

The location of Sunday's tornado is significant, not least because it is just 60 miles to the north of Bentonville, Arkansas, the global headquarters of

Walmart. In response to the disaster, Walmart announced that it would donate \$1 million to the local Red Cross, no doubt tax deductible. The sum is slightly more than one minute's gross revenue for the world's largest retailer.

The Walton family, the founders of Walmart, several of whose leading members live in Bentonville, is among the richest in the world, with a combined family wealth of close to \$90 billion. *This is approximately equal to the total wealth of the bottom 40 percent of the population, or some 120 million people.*

This massive inequality prevails throughout the country, and is reflected in the state of the housing stock. One statistic cited in a recent article on the *World Socialist Web Site* is particularly striking: The tornado death rate for mobile home residents today is about the same as the overall national death rate from tornadoes in 1925, when much of the country's "tornado alley"—Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri—lacked the most basic social infrastructure. Prior to the Joplin tornado, at least 119 of those killed in tornadoes this year lived in mobile homes.

The proliferation of mobile homes in tornado-heavy regions—which has accelerated since the financial crisis of 2008—has left vast sections of the population completely exposed to the elements. These structures cannot withstand winds of 70 to 80 miles per hour, let alone the nearly 200 mile-per-hour winds of the Joplin tornado and others like it this year.

It is not simply a matter of housing, however. The American ruling class is presently engaged in a general campaign to return the working class to conditions of life like those that prevailed in 1925, or even earlier. All the gains won by workers in the period since are targeted, including health care, retirement programs and public education.

Millions of people live on the bare edge of survival. An incident far less severe than a monster tornado is enough to send them from precarious financial instability to complete insolvency and destitution.

These conditions have been fostered by the policies of

the federal government, under both Republicans and Democrats, culminating in the Obama administration. Obama on Tuesday offered the ritualistic pledge to the people of Joplin that the government will “do absolutely everything it can to make sure that they recover.” He is due to make his usual perfunctory visit to the devastated city this coming weekend.

In fact, the victims, like those of previous disasters, will be left with little or nothing. This is a government, after all, which responded to the BP oil spill disaster by establishing a federal “compensation fund,” the central task of which was to find as many ways as possible to deny aid to those affected.

The real attitude of the political establishment to such disasters is expressed in the administration’s budget proposal for disaster relief through the Federal Emergency Management Agency: \$1.8 billion for the next year. An AP report noted that this is “less than half of what will be needed to deal with recovery costs of past disasters like hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Gustav and the massive Tennessee floods of last spring even as the next wave of bills come in.”

The economic toll in Joplin alone is estimated at \$3 billion in insured losses, not counting all the damaged structures that were uninsured. This follows flooding damages along the Mississippi of tens of billions, and at least \$6 billion in damage from the tornadoes that hit Alabama last month.

House Republicans have indicated that they might propose an increase in the budget for disaster relief by \$1 billion, but made clear that this funding would have to be cut from social programs. Last summer, limited infrastructure projects financed by FEMA were held up for six months due to inadequate resources.

The assistance made available through FEMA is already paltry at best. The agency’s web site itself is at pains to make clear that it “is not intended to restore your damaged property to the condition before the disaster.” It offers to finance home construction “only in insular areas or remote locations specified by FEMA.”

The government’s haggling over a billion dollars for emergency assistance stands in marked contrast with its readiness to expend tens or hundreds of billions of dollars to bail out the financial system and expand its wars abroad.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for a massive public works program in response to the Joplin, Missouri tornado and the other disasters that have afflicted the United States. This must include:

\* Emergency provisions to make all survivors whole, and rebuild all destroyed and damaged homes and buildings.

\* A housing program to ensure that everyone has a decent and safe home, including those who presently live in mobile homes and similar unprotected structures. Safe housing is a social right that must be guaranteed to all.

\* A vast expansion of social infrastructure, including warning systems, electrical grids and easily accessible shelters in all locations that are in tornado-prone areas. Many of those killed Sunday were apparently trapped in department stores and other public buildings that lacked any such shelters.

A national public works program will also provide high-paying jobs for tens of thousands of people who are unemployed in the region. It must be part of a broader public works program to rebuild and expand social programs and infrastructure throughout the country.

This program must be financed through a sharp increase in taxes for the wealthy (even a 10 percent wealth tax limited to the country’s 400 richest individuals would yield \$137 billion).

To free up resources monopolized by the corporate elite, and break their dictatorship over economic and political life, all major banks and corporations must be nationalized and transformed into publicly owned enterprises, run in the interest of social need, not private profit.

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