

# The tornado disaster and the case for socialist planning

Statement by Phyllis Scherrer, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for US vice president

**Phyllis Scherrer, SEP vice presidential candidate**  
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On behalf of the Socialist Equality Party and its sister parties worldwide, I would like to express my condolences and solidarity with all the victims of last week's tornadoes in the US. Scores of people have been killed, hundreds injured, and thousands have lost everything to the storms.

On Wednesday, Missouri, Kansas, and Illinois were struck by dozens of tornadoes as residents slept. At least 13 people were killed, including 6 in a low-income apartment complex in the historic mining town of Harrisburg, Illinois.

Two days later, the catastrophe was repeated in the towns of Henryville, Indiana and West Liberty, Kentucky. Friday's storms claimed at least 39 lives. Several small farming communities across southern Indiana and along the ridges of Eastern Kentucky mountains were simply swept away. No sirens warned residents there of the imminent danger.

These are not simply natural disasters. The conditions of long-term economic distress, mass unemployment, substandard housing, the absence of warning or emergency response systems all compound the impact and leave masses of people vulnerable to the brute force of nature. Large swathes of the United States resemble third-world countries or the US of a century ago, lacking in even the most basic social infrastructure.

All too often we see such tragedies flash across our television screens. The corporate media, like sharks responding to blood in the water, rush in to provide perfunctory coverage. Often news helicopters do a flyover and depart, collecting their stock footage to run between spots on the latest sex scandal and right-wing political punditry. The crocodile tears soon dry and the stories are abandoned.

In similar fashion, the big business politicians, Democrat and Republican, respond with clasped hands and prayerful press conferences. When the photo-op is done, and the sleeves are unrolled, it's on to the next \$30,000-a-plate campaign fundraising dinner. For the many working class communities across the Midwest and South devastated by this disaster, however, the hardship has only just begun.

On its web site, the White House has issued a one-paragraph statement assuring governors that the Obama administration would send "assistance, if necessary," in the form of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. In disaster after disaster, the president has insisted that funding-starved states shoulder the primary burden of emergency response and rebuilding, while hacking away at the FEMA budget. Large areas of Alabama and Missouri devastated by storms last year were essentially left to rebuild on their own and are today even more exposed to calamity, both weather-related and budgetary.

While masses of people are left pleading for baby formula, drinking water and tarps, the government hands the recovery operations over to billion-dollar insurance companies and other corporations. Thousands of people will be denied the ability to rebuild their lives and businesses because it does not suit the bottom line of these social parasites.

The social crisis in this region, which allowed a predictable storm to turn into a social catastrophe, has deep roots. As a life-long resident of Pittsburgh, I have witnessed firsthand the impact that the decimation of the steel and coal-mining workforce had upon living conditions in Appalachia and the Midwest. This destruction of entire industrial and mining communities was done with the complicity of the

unions and the Democratic and Republican parties.

Deindustrialization has produced deep poverty on the one hand, and on the other, the rise of an ultra-wealthy ruling class that has made its fortune on asset-stripping and financial swindling. American inequality has reached a point in our society where hedge fund managers earn more in an hour than workers make in their entire lifetimes, where such fantastic levels of wealth are combined with desperate poverty for millions of people.

What are families to do after they have lost their homes, jobs, schools, and communities? Millions of people are being denied the right to live decent lives, to have a future for their children or a dignified old age—all to protect as sacred the “right” of billionaire bankers and speculators to loot the public treasury and dismantle social life. No questions are asked about how much it will cost when it comes to bailing out the banks or waging wars of plunder.

Fundamentally, workers are up against more than the profiteering and greed of executives or the rapaciousness of companies. The working class is being driven headlong into conflict with an entire social order that prevails all around the world—in eastern Kentucky, in Greece, in China.

In order to secure its own rights, the working class must take up a struggle against the capitalist system, which is based on the exploitation of the vast majority for the profits of a tiny minority. Socialism is about establishing genuine social equality, based on democratic control over the economy and social infrastructure, by the multi-billioned working class.

The banks, insurance companies, energy giants, coal companies and agri-businesses that currently exercise such a stranglehold over communities across the rural US must be taken under the control of the working class and run as public utilities, for the well-being of all. The tremendous wealth that is held by these corporations and monopolized by the financial elite could be marshaled to meet the needs of the laboring class that actually creates it.

In depressed towns like West Liberty, Henryville, and Harrisburg, socialist planning would produce a flourishing of life for everyone. Public storm shelters and warning systems could be developed. Billions of dollars could be poured into emergency response, public clinics and food distribution centers. Safe housing would be treated as a social right.

Immediate steps would be taken to mitigate the affects of global warming, which the scientific community has pointed to as a primary factor behind the increasingly severe weather events in the US and elsewhere.

The profits of the coal and lumber industries would be used to restore the environment. Transport systems—including the rail lines crisscrossing Appalachia that are treated as the exclusive domain of the coal giants—would be commandeered for public transit and trade. Fresh, healthy food would be made widely available to those presently condemned to the “food deserts” of the coalfields. Universal public phone and Internet service would be established, linking up the rural to the urban areas. Public childcare and cafeterias would ease the burden of balancing family, work, and school. Job training centers and college education would be free.

All of this and more is attainable, but only through the development of a revolutionary party of the working class, based on a revolutionary program. Democrats and Republicans are both bought and paid for by the rich. No matter who is in office, all speak on behalf of the wealthy elite.

The working class must and will fight back. We are intervening in the presidential elections to articulate the aspirations and historical role of the working class and to fight for the rational, truly democratic alternative to capitalism: socialism. I hope you will join me in this struggle.

*Phyllis Scherrer will speak March 15 at a public meeting in Morehead, Kentucky. For more information, [click here](#).*

*To get involved in the SEP campaign, [click here](#).*



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