

Massive snowstorm cripples Buffalo, kills ten

Michelle Ryan
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Ten people have died and thousands of others are without power after a series of massive lake-effect snowstorms hit the Buffalo area. The storms dumped as much as 77 inches of snow in some areas, and additional storms are expected to drop another two feet of snow through Friday. Snowfall records in the US were broken, with over 65 inches falling in just the first 24 hours of the storm starting late Monday night.

As of Thursday, at least 150 cars and trucks were stranded on the New York State Thruway, with some occupants trapped for over 30 hours. Rescue workers on snow mobiles were able to reach some of the people, bringing them water, food and blankets, but many report spending over a day and a half without food and before getting any help. Some also ran out of gas and consequently heat.

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said that the thruway would not reopen for several more days. Cuomo blamed those who were stranded, saying that they ignored signage that the road was closed. However, many motorists dispute this, saying that signage was not activated and that automatic gates placed at thruway entrances were not down. In addition, many drivers who were already on the thruway when the storm hit were not able to get off by the time it closed. Once the snow started to accumulate, it quickly became impossible for vehicles to move.

Tens of thousands of people in the region, including senior citizens, the disabled, children and those who are ill, are trapped in their homes, unable to get to grocery stores, hospitals or pharmacies. Many are without power, heat, and phone service. Thousands of others are trapped in their homes by walls of snow.

A large number of Buffalo's homeless population is trapped in shelters that require daily deliveries of food, while many others are forced to remain on the streets.

At least 10 people have died as a result of the storm. A 46-year-old man was found in a car buried in a 15-foot snowdrift. Another man was crushed as he tried to help another person push his car.

An elderly man who needed care for an urgent cardiac condition died because rescue crews could not get him to a hospital. Other deaths are blamed on heart attacks caused by people trying to shovel or use snow blowers to move large quantities of heavy snow.

The City of Buffalo Public Works Department has been overwhelmed, having been targeted for budget cuts for over a decade. The city, which experiences yearly lake-effect snowstorms, has only 35 plows. In West Seneca, located in the traditional "snow belt" region just south of Buffalo, 10 of the town's 22 snowplows got stuck in the fast moving storm and had to be towed.

Over 200 plows from other areas of the state have been brought into the area, but traditional removal techniques do not work for such large volumes of snow. Earth-moving machines and industrial-scale snow blowers are required for moving snow that is over two feet deep. The state has sent only 17 such snow blowers.

Cuomo has also declared a state of emergency for 10 counties in Western New York, and has brought in the National Guard to assist with snow removal and rescue operations.

City officials stated that it could take another four or five days to clear the snow, but they are hopeful that warming temperatures and rain expected early next week will melt the snow. However, that could exacerbate problems as fast melting of such vast quantities of snow would likely lead to flooding and ice dams, as well as to roof collapses and property damage caused by rain-soaked snow and ice. Some weather forecasters are concerned that the sudden warming could generate a flashflood similar to an 18-inch rainstorm, swelling creeks and sewer systems. In addition, many homes and other structures could be submerged under frozen water.

The storm that began Monday night, with snowfall rates of four to five inches an hour, is a result of what is termed "lake effect." In this phenomenon, moisture over the Great Lakes turns to snow and is blown, often accompanied by high winds, onto land. Lake effect snow systems form in narrow bands, oftentimes only five to ten

miles wide, which produce large snowfalls in some regions, while locations only several miles away may have no snow at all.

In this week's storm, the Buffalo region has already received the average amount of snow that normally falls over the entire winter season—approximately eight feet, or 93.6 inches. South Buffalo and towns to the city's south have been the hardest hit.

Most school districts and colleges closed due to the dangerous weather conditions and travel bans. However, the University at Buffalo, the area's largest college serving approximately 40,000 students and employing thousands did not close, putting pressure on students and workers to put themselves at risk so as not to lose credit in classes or to be docked for missing scheduled work time. Anyone driving ran the risk of getting stranded on snow covered roads, as well as being ticketed by the police.

While untold billions are spent on wars, intelligence-gathering systems, and bank bailouts, cities across the country are left without adequate emergency vehicles and other equipment for dealing with natural disasters. With global warming likely increasing the incidence of severe storms, including lake effect storms of the kind that hit Buffalo, cities are being stripped of the necessary resources for protecting people and infrastructure.

The hypocrisy and callousness of the capitalist ruling elite toward the working class are revealed in their bogus claims that military operations and domestic spying are needed to protect people against threats to their security and lives. However, no such resources are provided to protect people against massive natural and manmade disasters, including Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, the BP oil spill, and deadly Great Lakes snowstorms.



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