

As snow melts, social conditions in Buffalo area remain dire

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While at least seven feet of snow in western New York state melts, and the risks of severe flooding slowly subside, the social costs of the storm continue to affect a large segment of the population throughout the city of Buffalo and its southern suburbs.

In Lackawanna, a working-class city located directly south of Buffalo, food shortages have become a concern for many, especially seniors and the disabled trapped in-doors.

Mary, a worker at the local senior center, told the WSWs that the center, which many seniors rely on for daily lunches, was closed for almost an entire week and was only able to open again on Monday.

"I'm not sure how some people were able to get food, especially seniors trapped in their homes," she said. "We have regulars who rely on meals here and we were unable to open, so they probably went hungry."

The city of Lackawanna is currently home to only one small grocery store, with many of the larger grocery chains located in the wealthier suburbs of Hamburg and Orchard Park several miles away.

Lackawanna, built up around an enormous steel works, was economically devastated in the 1980s when parent company Bethlehem shuttered the Lackawanna plant, laying off tens of thousands of workers, cutting pension and health benefits and condemning the city to a steep rise in poverty and joblessness that continues.

According to recent census data, approximately one-third of Lackawanna's 18,000 residents live in poverty. The current median household income in the city is \$35,275, compared to the national median figure of \$53,046. Nearby Buffalo regularly ranks in the top five for rates of both family and child poverty.

Aileen, director of the Catholic Charities Food Cupboard in Lackawanna, reported that many families in the area may have their Thanksgiving dinners

delayed due to the blizzard.

"We believe we have enough food for everyone," she told the WSWs, "but people who might have come in last week to get their Thanksgiving and weekly food supplies were not able to make it in, and might still have difficulty this week even though the roads are improving."

She added that the food cupboards across the region had seen a stark increase in demand in recent years, due to joblessness and underemployment, but demand had spiked noticeably since the beginning of the economic crisis in 2008.

"There has certainly been an increase in the number of people using our food cupboards over the past few years," she said, "not only due to joblessness but also due to many other issues which might include having a job but having hours cut, paying for health insurance vs. food, or falling ill and being unable to afford food while also paying for medications. So we were prepared for the demand this year since we expect a high demand every year, but unfortunately the blizzard has just made it impossible for people to get here."

At another nearby food cupboard in South Buffalo, Aileen reported that her organization had given out food supplies to over 350 people earlier in the day.

She added that roof tear-offs had disproportionately affected the people living in mobile homes. Several mobile home parks in Buffalo and the surrounding suburbs had to be evacuated due to the high risk of collapsing roofs. The mobile "trailer" homes are metal pre-fabricated structures that are often purchased by low-income workers as residences due to their comparatively low price. People living in trailers suffer the worst effects from any severe weather events, as the structural integrity of their homes is prone to failure during the extreme winds produced by tornadoes,

hurricanes, and other storms.

Those looking to benefit from the crisis targeted residents living in mobile homes to make a quick profit off of people fearing for their safety. Margie Paige, a resident of a mobile home in the suburb of Cheektowaga, told the Associated Press that she paid \$600 to a contractor to have her roof cleared of snow, in fear of the roof falling in on her.

Shortly after she paid, a volunteer crew arrived at her mobile home park offering to shovel off roofs for free. “I should have waited,” Paige told the AP, “but I was so afraid of my roof collapsing. I was so anxious to get it done.”

As such weather-related catastrophes reveal, far from being the “the best time in human history to be born,” as President Obama claimed recently, the United States is a society of severe class divisions and mass social suffering. The monopolization of society’s resources in the hands of the rich allows them to ride out such crises in safety and comfort, while condemning the working class to deal with life-threatening conditions that are entirely preventable.



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