

US blizzard: At least 27 dead, hundreds of thousands without power

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A strong winter storm system (named “Winter Storm Jonas”) moved through the eastern United States over the weekend, burying major cities and towns from the Carolinas to New York under record-setting amounts of snow. So far, 27 people have been confirmed dead from car crashes, hypothermia and other tragedies that would have been prevented had there been fully funded safety response programs and a safe transportation infrastructure.

As in Flint, Michigan with its lead-poisoned water, people are killed because the social needs of the population are entirely subordinated to the corporate drive for profit.

Eighty million people were impacted by the storm, roughly one quarter of the population of the US. The mid-Atlantic and southern Appalachian states of Virginia, West Virginia and Maryland were hit the hardest, with some areas reporting three feet or more of snow. The coastlines in New Jersey, Maryland and Virginia were battered by hurricane-force winds, causing significant flooding and power outages. In New Jersey and the Carolinas, over 190,000 homes reported power outages. Thousands remained without electricity on Sunday. Tens of thousands of flights were canceled and thousands of car crashes were reported from state to state.

Governors in 11 states declared states of emergency, while major highway closures and travel bans were put in place. Preparations were largely limited to police measures as practically all transit was brought to a halt. In New York City, police officials warned motorists to “Stay off the road... We don’t want to have to arrest you.” Similar warnings were given in Washington, DC, Maryland and Virginia. In Virginia, Democratic Governor Terry McAuliffe ordered the mobilization of 700 members of the US National Guard.

In a country that is supposedly the most advanced in the world, the ability of storms to bring life to a standstill for a vast portion of the country is an indictment of an economic system devoid of any rational planning. Despite the fact that storms are common features of life (increasingly so today due to climate change), the ruling class has neglected basic infrastructure and disaster planning to such a degree that dozens of preventable deaths occur each time a major storm hits.

Many of those who were killed in the most recent storm were workers attempting to drive to or from work. One Kentucky transportation worker was found keeled over in his snowplow after likely freezing to death while seeking to clear the roads.

A Greenville South Carolina couple died in their homes after suffocating from carbon monoxide. The couple, 87-year-old Robert Bell and his 86-year-old wife Ruby, lived through the Great Depression and World War Two but died after losing power during the storm. They had set up a generator in the garage, and although they left the door open to protect themselves, the door closed during the night likely due to wind or snow.

A 23-year-old New Jersey mother and her one-year-old son died of carbon monoxide poisoning while sitting in a car they had left running to stay warm. The tailpipe became blocked with snow, and when the car was discovered by the woman’s husband, he found that only his 3-year-old daughter was alive. She remains in “very critical condition.”

The death toll likely does not take into consideration unaccounted-for homeless people, despite efforts by charities to shield the homeless from the storm. In New York City, more than 3,300 of the city’s homeless population of 60,000 are not able to find spots in the

city's shelters. In Philadelphia, there are roughly 4,000 homeless people on a given night, only some of whom are able to find spaces in shelters. Homelessness in the state of Massachusetts rose 40 percent between 2007 and 2014, while funding for homeless families fell by 6 percent in the same period.

For the most part, the wealthy do not suffer from these catastrophes, though they were inconvenienced by the most recent storm. The *New York Times* published an article yesterday lamenting how theatergoers were disappointed because the storm prevented them from seeing a \$1,000-a-ticket Broadway show.

"For the 2,600 people who had tickets to the Saturday matinee and evening performances of 'Hamilton,' the cancellations were a particularly low blow," the *Times* wrote. The investment website *Bloomberg* reported pleasantly that "stock, bond, and commodities markets in New York are planning to operate on regular schedules Monday."

Though storms may be natural phenomena, the death tolls are almost entirely manmade. In the United States, a neglected, crumbling infrastructure is to blame. The American Society of Civil Engineers gave the US a "D+" in infrastructure in its 2013 report card.

1,836 people died in Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and another 195 were killed during Hurricane Ike three years later. 285 perished in Hurricane Sandy, which passed through the East Coast in 2012. Blizzards are also commonly deadly in North America. In 2010, the North American Blizzard left 41 dead—28 in Mexico and 13 in the US. The "Storm of the Century" led to the deaths of over 350 in the Eastern United States in 1993, with the Blizzard of 1996 killing over 150 people in the same part of the country.

Yet despite the regular occurrence of storms, nothing is done to prepare major American cities for their inevitable impact.

In October, the US House passed a bill that would slash \$20 million from the Federal Transit Administration. In particular, the bill targeted transportation funding to public transit in "high density" states across the mid-Atlantic. From 2010 to 2012, Congress slashed funding for Federal Emergency Management Agency preparedness grants in half—from \$3.05 billion to \$1.35 billion. From 2003 to 2014, spending on transportation and water infrastructure has

decreased by 4 percent as a share of GDP, according to the Congressional Budget Office. Spending by the federal government on transportation and water infrastructure declined by 19 percent over the same period.

State governments have also slashed their funding for transportation as well. Republican presidential candidate and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, whose administration slashed \$175 million from his state's transportation budget in Fiscal Year 2015, sought to transform the blizzard into an election promotion, declaring "What you see in New Jersey today are results... And that's why the people of the United States should strongly consider supporting me for president of the United States, because when the chips are down, I deliver."

The ruling class's funding priorities reveal their parasitic social character. Earlier this month, the US Navy announced that over \$80 billion would be spent upgrading its nuclear submarine fleet.



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