

Hurricane Hermine causes massive flooding and power outages in Florida

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3 September 2016

Early Friday morning, a category 1 hurricane named Hermine made landfall in northwestern Florida, marking the first time in 11 years that the state has had such a storm. At least 150,000 people in the area lost electricity, and many communities along the central gulf coast have seen severe coastal and rainfall flooding after the storm passed up the Gulf of Mexico. Governor Rick Scott has stated ominously that he has 8,000 National Guard troops on standby.

The storm first made landfall in the Big Bend area, where peninsular Florida meets the panhandle, with maximum sustained winds of 80 mph. Hermine then weakened into a tropical storm after moving over Florida, but as of this writing was still moving toward Georgia and North Carolina. The storm is expected to then move up the Atlantic coast reaching as far as New Jersey. Newscasters are predicting as much as 10 inches of rain in many locations across the Southeast.

Much of the flood damage that has occurred came before the storm even hit land. The storm sent strong winds and rains and storm surge across central Florida as it moved through the Gulf of Mexico. The National Hurricane Center (NOAA) warned earlier in the week that much of the flooding that would result from the storm on the gulf coast of Florida could be life-threatening. Several counties in that area have issued mandatory evacuation notices for communities on the water or in other low-lying areas. In some places, storm surge was predicted to rise six to nine feet.

For residents in the Tampa Bay area, the flooding started long before the hurricane hit land, as early as Wednesday. Swaths of rain fell across the area, flooding roads and forcing schools to close. Wastewater workers in St. Petersburg, who have previously spoken to the *World Socialist Web Site* about horrific work conditions during such storms, are again being forced

to work 35-hour shifts in order to keep the sewage system in operation. Reports were already emerging on Wednesday of manholes spewing sewage in Largo, Florida.

Thousands of pictures have been shared by people across social media of flooding in various regions. Many places appear to be sitting in 10 inches or more of water.

It was initially reported that in Tallahassee, Florida's capital, 100,000 utility customers lost power as strong winds and rain fell upon the city. Ominous photographs of the city, including of the campus of Florida State University, have appeared on Twitter, showing complete darkness where the sky is usually brightly lit.

Another 100,000 have reportedly lost power across Florida, Georgia and South Carolina. Some customers have been told that they may be without power for multiple days.

Another concern in northern Florida and southern Georgia is the possibility that Hermine will create tornadoes. Tornado watches came into effect as the storm hit land in several counties in both states. There have already been dozens if not hundreds of instances of trees crashing down onto houses and cars across peninsular Florida as well as where the storm has passed in northern Florida.

As the storm approached, Governor Scott declared a state of emergency for 51 of the state's 67 counties, ordering state offices in those counties to close. Most school districts and universities were also closed on Thursday and Friday. Georgia Governor Nathan Deal and North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory similarly declared states of emergency in 56 and 33 of their state's counties, respectively.

A major concern of some Florida residents is the spread of Zika in the wake of the storm, which may

leave behind large areas of standing water. However, an official from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has stated that the type of mosquito that potentially carries Zika is negatively affected by heavy rain and flooding—its larvae and small breeding sites are typically washed away.

Since the last hurricane that hit Florida, Wilma in 2005, the state's population has risen by about 2 million people. According to census data, the population has grown by 7.8 percent since 2010. This means that there are many new residents who have never endured a hurricane before. Georgia began opening emergency shelters on Thursday for residents in areas where the storm is predicted to pass.

The Big Bend area, where Hermine made landfall, is characterized by coastal lowlands that are not densely populated but are extremely poor. There are probably less than 100,000 people living those counties—Taylor, Dixie, Levy, Lafayette and Gilchrist—that were directly hit. Even in the state's capital, Tallahassee, where incomes are a little higher, the official poverty rate is more than 30 percent.

Per capita incomes in the currently flooded counties are about the lowest in the country, especially given the low official unemployment numbers, which are in reality more than 10 percent. The average income is between \$13,000 and \$18,000, and the poverty rate reaches between 20 and 35 percent.



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