

Thousands suffer as dangerous cold blankets US Midwest

Our reporters
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Bitter cold afflicted thousands of men, women and children in the Midwest and Great Plains over the weekend as temperatures and wind chills dropped to record lows. Thousands were left in a desperate search to seek warmth and safety from the cold. Hardest hit were the homeless, who in many cases had very few options, with some forced to sleep in packed shelters or seek help from friends.

More than three dozen record lows were set over the weekend while temperatures hit 20 to 30 degrees below zero Fahrenheit in some areas. While such temperatures are not that unusual in the US Midwest, the cold has caused enormous suffering and hardship under conditions of continued widespread homelessness and with broad layers of the population living in substandard housing, often without utilities.

The impact has been particularly severe in large urban centers, where chronic high levels of unemployment and homelessness strain an already substandard social safety net.

Reporting teams from the *World Socialist Web Site* visited warming centers in Detroit and Chicago over the weekend to speak to those seeking temporary refuge from the freezing temperatures.

A WSWS reporting team visited a warming center at the Team Wellness Center near Eastern Market in Detroit. Despite high levels of homelessness and poverty in the city, the administration of Democratic Mayor Mike Duggan has opened only a handful of warming centers. This under conditions where thousands are homeless and tens of thousands more are living in homes lacking basic amenities such as heat, electricity or running water.

Team Wellness provides mental health and other healthcare services in the central Detroit area. The center was distributing donated food baskets when the

WSWS reporters arrived.

Kim Luce, a care coordinator for Team Wellness Center, said, “Members are coming in to get warm and are asking for blankets. We are also having a coat drive.

“There are homeless people who come here and people living in homes without running water or electricity. I have a couple of people who have had their electricity cut off. There are older people, young mothers with children who sleep together to keep warm. We have people who live in abandoned homes.”

She spoke about the claims that Detroit is being “revitalized.” “It is kicking downtown, but as soon as you step outside of downtown, it is desolate. It is scary. Houses are burnt. Houses are vacant. You can’t survive on what the jobs are paying.”

Antonio Walker, age 45, told the WSWS, “This place has kept me warm and safe. I got frostbitten last year when I was homeless.”

“I don’t wish homelessness on another man or woman. I know what it is like to eat out of a trash can. If you have to survive, you will do it.”

Teresa, age 57, said, “I am here for a food basket, and I can really use it. All I receive is food stamps. No cash assistance. It is an every day struggle to survive.

“I was in a car accident in 2011 and now I am disabled. No one will hire me. I get subsidized rent, but even the \$50 a month they charge me is difficult to pay because I don’t have any cash income.

“There are quite a few people in situations similar to mine. Even when you are working, the wages don’t pay the bills. I had worked my way up to earning \$16.50 an hour, but the starting pay is only \$7.50. Can you imagine that! People are in need.”

Tracy Sullivan said, “I came here to get a Christmas box. I don’t have a furnace right now at my house. I am doing the best I can without it. It has been really cold. I

have been using a stove and a space heater, and that is so dangerous. I also have to take care of a granddaughter.”

As freezing temperatures forced Chicago’s homeless population to seek shelter, the administration of Chicago Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel opened only one warming center on Chicago’s west side at the Garfield Center. According to Chicago’s Homeless Count Survey, 5,889 homeless lived in Chicago in 2016, likely a significant underestimation of the real number.

A WSWs reporting team visited the warming center to speak to those seeking shelter. The center closed at 5pm, after which everyone inside, including children, were forced to seek alternative forms of shelter.

Lloyd, who became homeless in June, told the WSWs, “I got here at six this morning. Before that it was nine. Every now and then they’ll give you a lunch. But they usually only feed the women and children.

“It’s supposed to be 24 hours but it closes at five. You always get a different excuse every time. It has yet to be open for 24 hours.

“I’m going to the shelter after this that only holds 72 people. It’s packed.”

He added, “I’ve been homeless since June. The Chicago Housing Authority never switched me over and gave me new housing. It’s been rough.”

Shortly afterwards, volunteers from the Salvation Army arrived and began handing out soup and coffee to mostly mothers and children.

Kevin, asked by the WSWs team for how long he had been homeless, responded, “Too long. It’s the cost. It’s too high, the housing. Rent, single rooms only, they’re all too high. That’s why I left before. I went down to Texas for four years. I came back, everything was good up until 2001 when that economic thing was going on.”

When asked if he thought Emanuel, along with the rest of the Chicago politicians, were doing enough to help the homeless during the cold months, he said, “I’ve been homeless over 10 years. It’s been rough. I don’t think they’re doing too much of anything to help the homeless people.

“I’ve seen quite a few people get hurt in the winter time. They come in with frostbite, gangrene and all kinds of stuff. It’s rough here.

“There are few shelters around to keep people off the

street but they could be doing more, especially with all these empty houses. If it was me, I would set up some kind of program where people can stay in a building and while they’re staying there they can be fixing it at the same time.

“The shelters are overcrowded. They’re getting worse and worse because they closed up a lot of mental centers and you got a lot of mentally ill people coming around because they don’t have anywhere else to go. So you got a mixture of people that got education and half of the other people have mental issues and drug problems and alcohol problems.”

A homeless worker, Jermaine, told the WSWs: “I work, I just don’t get enough work to make ends meet. I stack skids for a living. Today is the first I’ve ever been to 10 S. Kedzie, but I think the warming center closes at five and I think that’s kind of early because it’s going to be real cold after five. I’ll probably sleep by a friend’s tonight.”

He added, “I’m exhausted. My thing is, you have all these politicians and people wanting to get into office and all of these promises and with all these taxes being raised, where is all of this money going to? Where are the jobs? There shouldn’t be any reason for anyone not to be working.

“Everyone should have a job. For example, if I had some power to pull some strings, I would get people from different communities together and come clean the trash in the vacant lots. That’s a job in itself and that’s something that could be done everyday. There are solutions to these problems. It’s just, whoever is in power, they want it to be this way.”



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