

Millions face devastation from Hurricane Irma in southwest Florida, Tampa metro area

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Hurricane Irma came ashore in southwest Florida Sunday late afternoon, with winds exceeding 120 mph hitting Naples, Ft. Myers and other Gulf Coast communities. A storm surge estimated at 15 feet or more hit Marco Island, an affluent area near Naples.

So powerful was the storm that wind speed instruments in both Naples and Marco Island were destroyed.

As of this writing, high winds have begun to blow in the Tampa metropolitan area, population 3 million, with the hurricane bearing down on the area and expected to hit around 2 a.m. Monday morning. Although the hurricane has been downgraded, authorities expect the Tampa Bay area to be hit with damaging winds from 75-100 mph, along with storm surges in the low-lying area.

Some 7 million people are without electric power throughout the state, according to Florida Power & Light, including nearly ten thousand crammed into a shelter at Germain Arena in Estero, near Naples, where there were long lines to gain admission on Saturday.

More than 100,000 people are in shelters across the state, and in the Tampa metropolitan area shelters were totally full and closed to late arrivals. The Tampa-St. Petersburg area has not been struck directly by a hurricane in nearly a century.

Heavy flooding was reported in the Florida Keys, where the storm first made landfall on the US mainland early Sunday morning, and along the Atlantic Coast, including Miami and Ft. Lauderdale.

While Miami and cities further north along the Atlantic were spared a direct hit by the center of the storm, Irma is so extensive that it spread across the entire peninsula, producing storm surges from the Atlantic Ocean as well as the Gulf of Mexico.

High winds collapsed at least two tower cranes on

constructions sites in downtown Miami, although no one was reported injured in either incident. A tornado was reported near the Miami-Ft. Lauderdale International Airport.

In response to a request from Florida Governor Rick Scott, the White House declared the entire state a disaster area. This was a legal formality, enabling the Federal Emergency Management Agency to begin releasing funds and emergency supplies.

The full dimensions of the disaster will not be known until the brunt of the hurricane has been felt in Tampa-St. Petersburg, as well as the impact on rain, wind and storm surge throughout the state.

One of the key areas of concern is Lake Okeechobee, which supplies water to both the Everglades and much of Florida's agricultural region. Communities on the edge of the lake are protected by the Herbert Hoover Dike, named after the president under whose administration it was first proposed. The more than 80-year-old earthen structure faces assault from both sides: wind storms on the outer perimeter and rain-fed rising waters on the inner.

The US Army Corps of Engineers, which maintains the Hoover Dike as it did the levees around New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina, conducted a controlled release of water from Lake Okeechobee on Saturday, claiming it had lowered the lake level sufficiently to ensure against flooding. Governor Scott nonetheless ordered the evacuation of seven towns near the lake as a precautionary measure.

While much of the media coverage has been limited to the daily tracking of the storm, virtually nothing has been said about the lack of any serious government measures to protect the population or the deep social divide which has been revealed by the storm.

The *Guardian* noted that there were "two Irmas," two

experiences of the hurricane: one for the wealthy, for whom it was a mere inconvenience, and one for the poor living in neighborhoods like Miami's Liberty City, deprived of the means either to escape the storm or to make even minimal preparations to ride it out.

In Miami, police have invoked a reactionary law known as the Baker Act, allowing them to detain anyone believed to pose "a danger to themselves or others" and send them to a mental institution for evaluation, where they can be held for 72 hours against their will. This was being used to round up any of Miami's more than a thousand homeless people who refused or were unable to go to shelters.

Denise, a resident of Tampa, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* as the storm approached her home and her power was flickering on and off. "They've built so much here but none of it has been thought through—it's backwards. You'll see multi-million-dollar houses along the water in places like Bayshore. Then a short distance away you'll find homeless people essentially camping in swampy areas, back behind nice subdivisions, where the city can't build anything.

"There used to be public housing but it's all been replaced with condos and stuff that is not affordable. There are no programs to help people, whether you're working or not working. Tampa has seen an influx of the homeless from Orlando because the tourist industry doesn't want them there. But Tampa doesn't want them either—they want yachts, stadiums and luxury houses. There was a story last year about the Tampa police putting a homeless mother with three small children back on the bus and shipping her back to Orlando."

Like in Houston and New Orleans before it, the hurricane in Florida will hit the working-class and poor residents the hardest. The economic impact of the storm will be especially devastating to the more than 50 percent of Florida homeowners who lack flood insurance. There is an estimated \$1.73 trillion in real estate in the path of Hurricane Irma, and even the restricted number of insured will file enough claims to wipe out the reserves of the National Flood Insurance Program, already \$25 billion in debt. Thirty percent of all federal flood insurance policy holders live in Florida, the agency said.

More than half of the homeowners in Hurricane Irma's direct path lack flood insurance, according to a

recent study by the Associated Press, highlighting a growing political crisis for lawmakers that is years in the making.

The combined economic impact of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma could produce a significant downturn in the US economy. Harvey's cost, estimated at \$180 billion or more, amounts to one percent of US GDP. Irma's cost is expected to be even greater.



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