

Hurricane Florence kills five in North Carolina, leaves nearly one million without power

Matthew Taylor
15 September 2018

Hurricane Florence continues to churn over North Carolina after making landfall Friday morning. As the storm slowly moved inland, it brought widespread flooding and power outages throughout the region. With an additional 15-20 inches of rain expected in the next day, the lives of untold thousands are at risk.

Across the Carolinas, millions were unable to evacuate and have been left facing the perils of floodwaters, destructive winds and power outages, as overwhelmed first responders struggled to keep pace with the powerful storm. The storm's impact has been compounded by the fact that it is impacting one of the country's poorest regions.

Once again, a natural disaster has exposed the totally inadequate state of public infrastructure in the United States. One year after Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico, killing more than 3,000 people, and Hurricane Harvey inundated Houston, no substantial preparations for mass evacuations or improvements to the country's infrastructure have been made.

The storm claimed at least five fatalities in North Carolina on Friday. A fallen tree killed a woman and her child inside their home in Wilmington. The child's father was injured and has been hospitalized. Another resident died after she suffered a heart attack and emergency crews were unable to reach her in time. A fourth man died after being electrocuted while plugging in a generator, and fifth was found dead after going outside to check on his dogs. The last time a major hurricane hit the state, Hurricane Matthew in 2016, there were 26 official fatalities.

The greatest danger comes from the floodwaters brought by the storm surge and massive amounts of rain. As of Friday, the storm was reported to be moving at only five miles per hour. This has the effect of prolonging the storm's intensity, as hurricanes feed off the warm ocean waters. The faster the storm moves inland, the faster it will lose intensity and break up. Because this is an especially slow-moving storm system, it has the capacity to do far more damage than

its Category One status indicates.

The storm surge reached seven feet on Emerald Isle, North Carolina, and could climb as high as eleven feet in other parts of the state. Overall, there is expected to be more than 50 inches of rainfall in the coming days.

FEMA issued a warning on Friday to residents who had not already evacuated, telling them to shelter in place. The agency has deployed 1,100 of its employees to North and South Carolina so far, along with 500 doctors and nurses and 7,100 members of the US Coast Guard. The National Guard from both states has also been activated.

The US Army Corps of Engineers has been deployed to the area to assist in restoring power and to protect nuclear power plants. There are six nuclear power plants in the path of the storm.

Approximately 20,000 people in North Carolina were in emergency shelters as of Friday, with an additional 5,500 in South Carolina. There are also an estimated 400 evacuees at shelters in Virginia. NPR reported that the influx of internal refugees from the storm in North Carolina is so great that shelters are running out of cots.

Thus far, an estimated 686,000 people have lost power in North Carolina, a number that is sure to grow as the storm moves further inland. At least 80,000 have lost power in South Carolina. Crews of electrical linemen, brought in throughout the south to help in restoring power, will be unable to start repairing electrical infrastructure until the storm passes. The region's poor and more rural residents will face weeks, possibly longer, without electricity.

Emergency responders rescued an estimated 300 residents in the coastal city of New Bern, North Carolina who became trapped in their attics or on their roofs when the flood waters rose unexpectedly fast. County officials estimate an additional 40 residents in that area still needed to be evacuated from their homes. The town's mayor, speaking to the media, said they had not experienced flooding like that since the 1950s.

Sixty-two people were evacuated from the Triangle Motor Inn in Jacksonville, North Carolina after the hurricane's winds ripped off part of the roof at the motel. Firefighters responding to the scene found the entire structure to be unsafe, with some cinder blocks already crumbling. The evacuees were transferred to another shelter.

The storm also has the potential to cause a widespread environmental catastrophe, as floodwaters will wash untold amounts of agricultural, municipal, and industrial waste into the state's water system.

Many of those unable to evacuate, in addition to being poor, are also elderly. This creates additional obstacles to evacuation as older residents often have various medical conditions that need to be attended to, and oftentimes lack a reliable network of family and friends who might help them. The danger of death will continue for days after the storm, as power outages restrict access to needed medicines and equipment.

Undocumented immigrants, who in the past have been threatened with detainment at shelters by state officials in Florida, are also particularly vulnerable.

All the various local and national news offered blanket coverage of the storm. As usual various reporters could be seen wading through floodwaters, leaning into the tropical winds, and generally trying to sensationalize the catastrophe as much as possible. This is a yearly ritual, with the networks enjoying some of their highest ratings during natural disasters. Though most news anchors and weathermen express genuine sympathy and concern for the victims, the central question is always left unasked: Why does this keep happening?

It has been one year since Hurricanes Maria, Harvey, and Irma killed thousands and dislocated millions. It has been over a decade since Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans. In the time that has elapsed since these catastrophes, there has been no significant action taken by the federal government to mitigate future disasters. The ruling class has proven incapable of taking the necessary measures to address global warming, which is fueling ever more powerful hurricane seasons.

Instead of spending the necessary billions to finance new shelters, levees, and other storm infrastructure, the federal and state governments have left citizens to their own devices. Those who are homeowners might purchase flood insurance at grossly inflated rates, but this will not stop the floodwaters from turning them into refugees. The millions of renters, mobile home residents, and the homeless have only their own ingenuity and the charity of others to rely upon.

In place of mobilizing all available trains, buses, and boats to evacuate the entire citizenry from the affected area and relocating them to decent temporary housing, the

government instead opened the eastbound lanes of the highways to outgoing traffic, allowing those with the resources to flee while the poorest and most vulnerable citizens are left to seek shelter in overcrowded schools, hotels and churches.

Finally, rather than expending the resources to completely rebuild the damaged areas, harden them against future destruction, and compensate those affected by the storm for their lost wages, destroyed homes, and psychological trauma, the government will instead deploy the corrupt, understaffed and inefficient FEMA bureaucracy to minimize the payouts victims of the storm will receive.

The same day Florence made landfall in North Carolina also marked the tenth anniversary of the bankruptcy of the investment bank Lehman Brothers, the event which triggered the 2008 global financial meltdown and led to the impoverishment of hundreds of millions. In the subsequent decade, governments around the world, led by the US, pumped trillions of dollars into the banks to keep them afloat. This policy, supported by both Democrats and Republicans, has produced unprecedented wealth for the financial elite, while the wages and living conditions of workers around the world have stagnated or declined.

The last decade has also seen the US spend hundreds of billions of dollars prosecuting its various wars around the world. It has occupied and waged wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine, all while spending further billions propping up dictatorships in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other US allies.

Had only a fraction of the money the US spent to bail out the banks and pursue its wars been spent instead on improving storm infrastructure and preparedness, the thousands of people who have died in hurricanes over the past decade would still be alive today. This is an indisputable fact, and the lives lost so that the banks could be made whole stand as an indictment of the capitalist profit system.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact