

Heavy snow storm exposes depth of social crisis in US Pacific Northwest

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A major snow storm, named Winter Storm Nadia, hit the Pacific Northwest region of the United States this past weekend bringing record snowfall and low temperatures, placing heavy burdens on the most vulnerable residents and causing damage to infrastructure.

Total snowfall varied across the region's cities and rural areas. The city of Seattle, Washington, received more than 14 inches of snow, the highest recorded snowfall for the entire month of February since 1916. In Portland, Oregon, snowfall reached an average of four inches across the metro area. The snowstorm also hit parts of Northern California and even Hawaii, which was hit with 60 mph winds and gusts as high as three times that on its highest summit.

In addition, residents faced record low temperatures and dangerous road conditions, leading to many health and safety concerns. Washington Governor Jay Inslee declared a state of emergency on Friday, which is still in place. Road closures and car accidents due to icy road conditions are common. These unsafe conditions are especially severe in southwest Washington and northern-central Oregon, where flooding began Tuesday from heavy rainfall and melting snow, causing mudslides and road blockages.

On Monday, a semi truck hauling two diesel fuel tanks crashed on Interstate Highway 84, which connects Portland to northeast Oregon, spilling roughly 2,500 gallons onto the road and into a nearby pond. Three semi trucks crashed near the industrial suburb Troutdale off the same interstate highway on Tuesday.

The storm has knocked over trees and power lines, causing mass power outages. More than 70,000 Washington state residents lack electrical power, while an untold number have experienced intermittent outages. Without consistent power, residents are

struggling to maintain electronic communications, food storage and heat.

While in much of the US such winter weather conditions are routine, it is highly unusual for the Pacific Northwest region. The social impacts of the storm have exposed the underlying conditions confronting wide layers of the population, generated from decades of growing social inequality.

Perhaps the most astounding social impact of the storm is on the area's massive homeless population. Hundreds of homeless people, often living in tents and cars throughout Portland, Seattle and other cities across the region, packed into temporary shelters organized by thinly-stretched nonprofit organizations. From what has been reported so far, at least one homeless man, 59-year-old Derek Johnson, has died from exposure and hypothermia. His body was found early Monday morning at a light rail station in downtown Seattle.

Seattle has an estimated homeless population of some 10,000 individuals today, up from 8,500 in 2017. According to the 2018 Annual Homeless Assessment Report by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Seattle's King County had the highest rate of growth in its homeless population, a situation tied directly to the rising costs of rent. At least four thousand homeless people reside in Portland, which has similar housing and wage trends as Seattle. Hundreds die each year from homelessness, and the hardships intensify in extreme weather conditions.

Deaths have been reported outside the homeless population as well. Carl Soderberg, 53, died from hypothermia in Maple Valley, Washington, and Stanley Little, 84, died from exposure in Fall City, Washington. On Tuesday, two people were injured from a roof collapse at a nursing home in Shoreline, Washington. More deaths and injuries are expected from lack of

shelter, proper heating or access to food and medications.

The storm's impact can also be seen within the job conditions of the working class. Forced to work either by their bosses or necessity to make ends meet, workers are dealing with heavier burdens and dangerous work conditions. Truck drivers still have to keep up with the long 60-hour weeks characteristic of the logistics industry, hauling heavy loads on icy and wet roads. Airport workers have to carry the frenzied weight of canceled flights and delays, and low-wage retail workers have to process high volumes of customers for storm preparation.

The situation of grocery stores in the days leading up to the storm revealed the pressures on food supply networks. Though news media announced the storm days in advance, grocery companies made no significant changes to their food supply or staffing. Thus, stores were wiped clean of essential food items like water and bread, and staff were overwhelmed with a rush of customers.

While weather can have deadly effects no matter what social-economic relations are in place, these relations determine societal-level response and the related human impacts. The underlying basis of the capitalist system determines, for example, the preparedness of the cities, the vulnerability of the poorest residents and the subsequent recovery process.

Other recent weather events and natural disasters, such as the "Polar Vortex" that hit the American Midwest in January and the fires that raged across the West Coast in the fall, have exposed the irrational character of capitalist society. As climate change makes weather patterns and temperatures more extreme, these events reveal the inherent inability of capitalism to meet social need despite the immense material resources and scientific knowledge that exists.



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