

Powerful windstorm leaves 4 dead, 1.5 million without power across US Midwest

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On Monday, a large swath of the US Midwest, including portions of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Nebraska and Wisconsin, was hit with a powerful derecho storm that claimed four lives and left over 1.5 million residents without power in its aftermath.

A derecho is a long-lived, straight-line, widespread windstorm. The name of the storm is derived from the Spanish word for “straight,” which describes the direction of its wind path, in contrast to the spinning wind path of a tornado. The storm causes other destructive weather events in its orbit, including tornadoes, flash floods, and hurricane-force winds.

Derechos develop into mesoscale convective systems—similar to a small scale tropical storm—and excessive heat in an area especially fuels their formation due to the convective currents which are more likely to form under these conditions, measured as convective available potential energy (CAPE). According to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, “Scientists have evidence that global warming should increase CAPE by warming the surface and putting more moisture in the air through evaporation.”

Victor Gensini, a meteorology professor at Northern Illinois University, described Monday’s storm as “one of the worst weather events of 2020 for the US.” Wind gusts peaked at over 110 mph in parts of Iowa, higher than some Category 1 hurricanes, indicating that it could be one of the strongest such storms in recent history. A devastating derecho in 2012, which swept from Iowa to the East Coast of the US, reached peak wind gusts of 91 mph, leaving 22 dead, 4.2 million without power and causing \$2.9 billion worth of damage.

From Nebraska to Indiana 1.5 million residents were left without power in the aftermath of Monday’s storm,

including 360,000 in the Chicago metropolitan area, and thousands still may not have power restored until early next week. On Thursday, over 250,000 residents in Iowa still did not have power. Restoring power has been complicated by the extensive damage of the storm, which wiped out homes, flipped vehicles, and downed large trees in both rural and metropolitan areas in the storm’s path.

Many tornadoes developed out of the storm, with 25 counted across the state of Illinois alone, including one which touched down at the far north end of the city of Chicago before turning into a waterspout in Lake Michigan.

A total of four deaths have been reported so far, and the total extent of injuries and deaths is emerging as residents have been trapped in vehicles and buildings damaged by the storm. In Iowa, two volunteer firefighters were killed, a 41-year-old man who was attempting to restore power and a 41-year-old woman who was struck by a tree. A 63-year-old cyclist was killed after a tree struck him during the storm. In Indiana, a 73-year-old woman died in Fort Wayne after the high winds destroyed her trailer home. She was found by firefighters under debris clinging to a five-year-old boy, who survived.

As with the notorious wildfires which swept through Northern California in recent years, residents were given very little warning by local officials that the massive storm was approaching, with many only hearing alerts just moments before the storm hit.

The state of Iowa suffered the worst damage. Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Mike Naig estimates that 10 million acres of farmland have been damaged by the storm in the largest corn-producing state in the country. This accounts for nearly a third of the 31 million acres of land used for growing crops. Iowa Republican

Governor Kim Reynolds issued disaster proclamations for 25 counties following the storm, and announced Friday that the state will submit a federal disaster declaration request on Monday, a full week after the end of the storm, in order to secure Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) disaster relief aid.

Former US President Barack Obama's administration cut FEMA's budget significantly over the course of his eight-year term. His last White House 2017 budget plan before leaving office proposed \$600 million in cuts to the agency, or 35 percent of funding compared to 2016 levels, in spite of the widespread recognition of the need for more funding due to the effects of climate change.

In 2014, the Obama administration diverted funding from FEMA, which is under the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS), to provide \$1.4 billion for the detention of an influx of immigrant children coming from Central America. This move set the precedent for US President Donald Trump to further cut FEMA to the bone and divert hundreds of millions of dollars from the agency's disaster relief funds over the course of his presidency toward deportation hearings, increasing detention center beds and militarizing the US-Mexico border.

The ruling class's criminal response to the storm and utter lack of preparation occurs as the US remains the world's epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic. The displacement of thousands from their homes due to power outages or storm damage and a flood of recovery workers into the region will ensure the spread of the virus through the Midwest and beyond.

In several impoverished smaller towns and suburbs across the Midwest, nearly 100 percent of residents lost power. In the working class Chicago suburb of Harvey, Illinois, 9,200 of 10,000 residents were without power; Linn County, Iowa saw 88,000 of 112,000 residents lose power; and in Tama County, Iowa 6,000 of 7,000 residents lost electricity due to the storm.

In Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the second largest city in the state, city spokesman Greg Buelow told Fox News that "scores" of patients in need of oxygen tanks and nebulizers were rushed to hospitals, which are in danger of becoming overwhelmed by the influx of COVID-19 victims after the economic reopening across the US has driven an upsurge in cases in recent months. The city itself has been placed under an indefinite

curfew from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. since the storm ended.

Several other patients reported to hospitals after the storm due to chainsaw injuries from needing to remove debris themselves, pointing to the crippling of social and emergency support services for the working class as local, state and federal officials have carried out bipartisan budget cuts for decades.

Workers who have lost everything in the storm will be crowded into shelters and aid centers where social distancing will be impossible, putting thousands more at needless risk of contracting COVID-19. For many families who have lost businesses and jobs, in addition to the devastating financial impact of personal property loss due to the storm, there is little to no hope of receiving any substantial aid in the form of FEMA relief or unemployment benefits to help them start rebuilding their lives.

As in their response to the pandemic, the wildfires that have ravaged the West Coast and the hurricanes and floods that have devastated the country, the American ruling class and its political parties show reckless disregard for human life and the environment.

Even as over 170,000 Americans have needlessly died during the pandemic, nine of the 10 wealthiest billionaires have increased their fortunes by 22 percent since March. Great resources and wealth created by the labor of the working class have been diverted to Wall Street, the banks and corporations, and the military-police apparatus in the name of preserving the wealth of a handful of elites at the expense of millions of lives.



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