

Two weeks after powerful windstorm, Iowa faces humanitarian crisis

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More than two weeks after the powerful derecho windstorm devastated a large swath of the US Midwest on August 10, the working class and poor in the hard-hit state of Iowa are still suffering from the catastrophic damage caused by the storm in the face of a lack of resources or urgency from local, state and federal government agencies.

A total of 1.9 million residents across the region lost power due to the storm, with 1.4 million maximum simultaneous outages, broken down by state to 759,000 in Illinois, 585,000 in Iowa, 283,000 in Indiana, and 345,000 in other states such as Nebraska and Wisconsin.

Four total deaths due to the direct impact of the storm were reported, three in Iowa and one in Indiana. To add to the criminality of the response of the ruling class and government, there exist no warning systems for derechos although they have occurred in the past, a repetition of the failure to warn residents of tornados in many parts of the Midwest and South or to raise alarms in California over the wildfires that swept through the northern part of the state in 2018.

In Linn County, Iowa, where winds reached their highest velocity at 140 mph, residents face a serious humanitarian crisis. In the city of Cedar Rapids, the second-largest city in the state with a population of 126,326, every one of the city's 60,000 homes and businesses were damaged to some degree, according to Mayor Brad Hart. Across Iowa, the storm severely damaged an estimated 82,000 homes. In the immediate aftermath of the storm, roads were impassable, cell phone service was very spotty, and trash removal was stopped across much of the state.

At a Monday press conference on the state of emergency in the city, Cedar Rapids Department of Public Works officials explained that crews are continuing to work to remove an estimated 48,000 tons of debris from curbsides. To underscore both the city and state's utter lack of preparation for such a disaster, officials noted that massive piles of debris in Cedar Rapids are continuing to pile up, with residents responsible for moving and hauling felled trees and other debris to their curbs for pickup. The total timeframe for cleanup and removal of tree debris in the Cedar Rapids area is expected to take months.

The city is using an outside contractor for pickup, meaning that it does not have the resources itself to coordinate cleanup from a natural disaster despite the recent experiences of major floods in the city in 2008 and 2016.

Meanwhile, traffic signals are still not fully operational, and

most street and safety road signs have not been repaired. A curfew in Cedar Rapids that had been set following the storm to keep residents off hazardous roads, blocked by felled trees and power lines, has now been lifted indefinitely, yet roads are still blocked or unsafe for travel in several areas.

Beth Malicki of local Iowa news station KCRG spoke to PBS about the anger of the residents toward the callous response of officials at all levels of government toward their immediate needs "What residents say they need most is the basics. Shelter, food, water, ice to keep insulin cold. They're not asking...to rebuild everything, because right now, this is a humanitarian crisis," she said.

Describing the popular response to the pace of aid and lack of any organization, she continued, "They're outraged; that's an understatement. There's been this lack of urgency in covering it. It's so desperate that people from nearby communities that weren't as hard-hit are going door-to-door to check on people"

The anger, she noted, is directed at "decision-makers who they feel did not move quickly and effectively enough at all levels," local, state and federal. "We've found people stuck in their homes...that's not our job as media...we're not supposed to be emergency responders, or advocates of anything but the truth."

Malicki went on to admit that FEMA had called her newsroom because they were not able to get through to Cedar Rapids city officials to find out where aid was needed. "These people are living in imagery that is unimaginable to be happening in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in the United States of America."

With the lack of any coordinated government response, residents must rely on charitable organizations for food assistance. At the press conference, the Salvation Army reported that 1,250 people were served lunch and dinner by the organization in the past week, but because the gym cafeteria was damaged by the storm, it has only the resources to provide grab-and-go meals twice daily on Wednesdays and Thursdays, hardly enough for the number of residents who are in need.

Cedar Rapids officials could not provide an update on exactly how many residents have been displaced, but estimate that 1,700 housing units were impacted by the storm—far lower than reported across other media outlets—and that the need for housing assistance for families will likely extend to two to three months in an area where temporary housing in hotels and motels "is continuously in flux."

Among the many residents who had their homes completely

destroyed are several hundred families living in an apartment complex in Cedar Rapids that is home mainly to refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Micronesia, who are all the more vulnerable due to their tenuous immigration status and inability to understand English. After the storm, most residents had nowhere to go and many stayed in dangerous apartments with no roofs and with wires hanging down and nails and sharp objects jutting from walls.

Volunteer Kelly McMann described the desperate conditions to PBS, explaining, "It feels like [we're] in a third-world nation here, this is like our version of a [Hurricane] Katrina, minus the deaths." The comparison to the devastating 2005 hurricane was apt, in both the scope of its damage and the government's negligent response.

Cedar Rapids city manager Jeff Pomeranz defended the city's highly inadequate response to the crisis in saying, "This is an unprecedented disaster...we've got council members working around the clock trying to make sure residents have a place to go."

Alliant Energy, which supplies power to Linn County, where Cedar Rapids sits, reported that 99 percent of customers finally had power restored 13 days post-storm. Mayor Hart told reporters at Monday's press conference that all power should be restored in the city in the coming days—over two weeks after the storm ended—and that "only" 650 city residents still remain without power. In his comments, he made clear that the city is relying heavily on volunteer firefighters for recovery efforts, further underscoring the total lack of preparedness for the storm.

Hart went on to detail the austerity aid packages for residents that are being provided through Federal Emergency Management Agency grants requested by Republican Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds. These include disaster loans of up to \$200,000 in low-interest loans to homeowners, and additional assistance to homeowners and renters of up to \$40,000 for terms of up to 30 years.

Governor Reynolds is scheduled to visit Cedar Rapids Tuesday to announce the distribution of Small Business Administration loans to businesses, many of which have been completely destroyed.

The widespread damage from the storm also threatens a possible food shortage in the US in the coming year, as over 14 million acres of crops were wiped out as wind gusts whipped across the state, exacerbating the hunger crisis brought on by job losses and rising food prices during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The impact to Iowa's farmland was so great that it was visible on satellite images taken by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Crops were flattened by the winds and had leaves stripped away by hail. Lance Lillibridge of the Iowa Corn Growers Association told Fox News that the storm destroyed 8.7 million acres of corn and 5.3 million acres of soybean, resulting in "a looming natural disaster that could affect the nation's food supply."

According to Lillibridge, without federal aid, many farmers will be in a dangerous situation where they "will probably just go under and be done." Even greater of a concern is the destruction of giant grain storage bins across the state that imploded under the force of the winds, which reached sustained speeds of 80-140 mph lasting for 40-50 mins, equivalent to a category 4 hurricane. The duration of high wind gusts was longer than derechos of the past, which

typically endured less than 30 mins.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration expects the August 2020 derecho will be one of the costliest storm events in the past decade, with agricultural economists estimating damage of \$4 billion. While the state at all levels has been utterly slow to respond with even the bare minimum of aid, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, whose company announced in February the opening of its first fulfillment center in the state just outside of Iowa City, increased his net worth by \$13 billion during a single day in July.

As it was with the wildfires in California and the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina, the criminal nature of the ruling class is revealed in its response to the humanitarian crisis in Iowa. The government and the corporations are allowed to get off scot-free, and the working class is left to pay for its negligence.

The Trump administration has treated the derecho as if it was another thunderstorm that residents will push through, a mirroring of the same attitude taken by the ruling class toward the coronavirus pandemic. Governor Reynolds waited until August 13 to declare a disaster in the state and did not request federal aid until August 16, asking for only \$4 billion from the federal government.

The Trump administration approved a paltry \$45 million of Governor Reynolds' aid request on August 17, covering 16 counties, for debris removal and repairs to government buildings and utilities. The administration did not immediately approve the individual assistance request for 27 counties that includes \$82.7 million for homes destroyed or with major damage and \$3.77 billion for agriculture damage to farmland, grain bins and buildings and \$100 million for private utility repairs. An amended individual assistance plan, with cuts that Reynolds agreed to, was implemented on August 20.



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