

The Florida condo disaster

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Search and rescue operations continued for a second day Friday after the collapse early Thursday morning of a portion of the Champlain Towers South condominium in Surfside, Florida. According to the latest reports, four residents are dead and a dozen have been injured, but the toll is expected to rise substantially, with 159 residents still unaccounted for.

The residents of the beachfront building, located just north of Miami Beach, include retirees, middle class families and vacation renters. Depending on how many people were in bed and how many survivors can be pulled from the rubble, the Champlain Towers disaster will rank as one of the deadliest residential building collapses in American history. The incident once again exposes the decrepit state of infrastructure in the United States and raises questions about how such a building could fall down in the wealthiest country in the world.

Among the missing is Edgar Gonzalez, whose wife Angela and 16-year-old daughter Devon survived a fall from the ninth to the fifth floors and are in the hospital with significant injuries. Luis Andres Bermudez and his mother Ana Ortiz, who lived together on the seventh floor, have also been reported missing. According to CBS Miami, a family member reported that Bermudez suffers from muscular dystrophy and would be unable to yell for help.

Constructed in 1981, the 12-story, 136-unit condominium was undergoing electrical and structural inspections in accordance with Miami-Dade County requirements stipulating that commercial and multi-family buildings be recertified every 40 years, when it suddenly and catastrophically imploded, bringing 55 units down to the ground.

“There’s no reason for this building to go down like that,” Surfside Mayor Charles Burkett told NBC’s “Today” show, “unless someone literally pulls out the supports from underneath, or they get washed out, or there’s a sinkhole or something like that, because it just

went down.”

The exact cause of the structural failure that caused one floor to pancake on top of the other has yet to be determined, but reports have already emerged of concerns about the structure in recent years that could have contributed to the disaster.

In 2001 and again in 2015 a unit owner filed suit against the condo association for failing to fix cracks that had developed in the outside wall of her apartment. According to the 2015 lawsuit, the cracks resulted in water damage amounting to \$15,000. Such cracking can be a sign of the development of more serious issues in a reinforced concrete structure like the Champlain Towers.

A 2020 study of satellite data by Shimon Wdowski, professor in the Department of Earth and Environment at Florida International University, found that the building, constructed on reclaimed wetlands, had been sinking at a rate of 2 millimeters per year in the 1990s. “We saw this building had some kind of unusual movement,” Wdowski told *USA Today*.

Structural engineer Paul Zilio told the *Washington Post* that the rate of sinking could have contributed to the failure “because if that continued for the 40-year life of the building, the total of over three inches of settlement could certainly contribute to the collapse.”

Investigators will also have to consider the impact of sea spray and rising ocean levels caused by human-induced climate change in undermining the integrity of the structure, which is located less than 500 feet from the Atlantic Ocean.

“Over time, the salt water can penetrate the concrete and corrode the reinforcing steel, causing the reinforcing steel to expand,” Zilio explained to the *Post*. “This expansion cracks the concrete and eventually chunks of concrete spall off, weakening the capacity and making the reinforcing steel even more exposed to corrosion.” He noted that the lower-level

parking garage would have been exposed to the corrosive effects of sea spray.

Melting glaciers and warming ocean temperatures are already contributing to rising tides inundating the coastal regions of Miami-Dade County, regularly soaking the concrete foundations of high rises in corrosive salt water and eroding shorelines. Sea levels in the area have risen by a foot since the 1900s and are expected to rise another two feet by 2060.

The city of Miami estimates that \$4 billion is needed over the next 40 years for a master plan to protect the city from rising waters, including six-foot-high sea walls and underground pipes to drain away water. Hundreds of thousands of people living on the Florida coast will be displaced if sea levels continue to rise.

“This is a tragic, devastating event, and it could be a canary-in-the-coal-mine type event,” Albert Slap, CEO of RiskFootprint, a company that assesses the vulnerability of buildings to floods and storm surge, told the *Post*. “It’s not just one building. This could be something that could affect other buildings.”

The Surfside condo collapse is only the latest in a string of disasters in the United States that is the result of the decay of infrastructure and the systematic undermining of health and safety regulations over the last four decades. Every aspect of American society has been subordinated to the funneling of resources to the rich at the expense of the vast majority.

The latest report card by the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) gives the country’s infrastructure the dismal grade of C-. More than a third of school buildings have heating and cooling systems, plumbing systems or windows in fair or poor condition. The ASCE notes that there are more than 46,000 bridges that are structurally deficient but still see millions of trips every day. It reports that the country has a backlog of \$125 billion in repairs needed for 231,000 bridges.

The Hernando De Soto Bridge, which connects Memphis, Tennessee to Arkansas across the Mississippi River, was shut down in May after a crack was discovered in a critical support beam, which could have resulted in a catastrophic failure. The bridge is inspected just every two years. Only by chance was another disaster avoided like the 2007 bridge collapse in Minneapolis, Minnesota, which killed 13 people. Closer to Surfside, a pedestrian bridge collapsed onto a

freeway in Miami in 2018, killing four people.

Despite the burning need for a historic investment in the country’s bridges, roads, homes, factories and schools to fix that which is rapidly decaying and prepare for the catastrophic implications of climate change, the Biden White House is working with Congress on an infrastructure bill that will be yet another giveaway to the banks and corporations.

Biden has endorsed a \$579 billion bipartisan proposal to be spread over five years, barely a drop in the bucket compared to what is needed. Proposals to raise taxes on the rich to pay for new investments have already been ruled out. While the Republicans and Democrats haggle over infrastructure spending, Biden has put forward a request for a \$753 billion military budget for the next fiscal year, the largest on record.

One can be certain that the official investigation of the Surfside tragedy will conceal far more than it reveals, and that none of those chiefly responsible will be held to account.

As with the COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in the deaths of more than 600,000 Americans, the disaster in Surfside places in stark relief the reality that under capitalism the interests of society are completely subordinated to the interests of the financial elite, no matter the cost in human suffering and loss of life. A solution to the problems that confront humanity will not come through the profit system or any of the parties of the financial oligarchy. It will come through the revolutionary transformation of society under the democratic control of the working class on the basis of a socialist program.



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