

Hundreds die in Pacific Northwest heat crisis

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Hundreds have died of heat stroke and hyperthermia in British Columbia and an unknown number in the US states of Washington and Oregon in a five-day heat wave that began to subside on Wednesday—or rather, to pass further east into the less populous mountain areas of Idaho, Montana and eastern B.C.

The chief health officer of British Columbia put the death toll from the first four days of the heat wave at 233, the bulk of them in the Vancouver metropolitan area. The death toll in Oregon was estimated at 60, including a farmworker, a recent immigrant from Guatemala, who died working outdoors on Saturday at a plant nursery north of the state capital at Salem. The state of Washington, with the largest number of people exposed to the lethal temperatures, did not even bother to issue an official estimate of the death toll.

As temperatures mounted over the weekend, newspapers in Portland, Seattle and Vancouver displayed an almost schizophrenic character. One side of their front pages carried dire warnings about the heat wave and the need for precautions to stay cool. The other side carried celebratory reports of the end of COVID lockdowns and the “reopening” of the local economies—meaning that tens of thousands of workers are being forced back into workplaces that are little more than ovens.

The Boeing factory in Everett, Washington, where jumbo jets are assembled, is reputedly the largest building in the world. It is also entirely without air conditioning. When the weather is hot, management orders the doors opened, which meant on Monday, letting in 108-degree air. International Association of Machinists District 751, which “represents” the workers at Everett, issued a one-paragraph statement urging workers to take more water breaks and linking to “Boeing documents dealing with high temperatures,” in other words, health and safety information provided by the company.

The tragic events of June 25-29 are the product of two interrelated processes: the formation of a “heat dome” over the region, due to instabilities in the movement of the jet stream in the upper atmosphere; and the systematic

neglect of critical infrastructure and public services by capitalist governments in both the United States and Canada.

The heat dome is itself not primarily a “natural” process but rather a byproduct of climate change, a man-made process, which, in addition to raising the overall temperature of the atmosphere, also facilitates extreme weather phenomena of all kinds, including tornados, hurricanes, floods and more violent erosion of coastlines.

This is the underlying connection between such disparate events as the early start to the Gulf hurricane season (four “named” storms before the official July 1 starting date); the collapse of a 12-story residential building in Surfside, Florida (due in part to rising sea levels, undermining the soil of the former sandbar on which the high-rise was built); the flooding of highways, homes and factories in Detroit (a sudden rainstorm dumped as much as seven inches in a 12-hour period); and the heat dome over Oregon, Washington and British Columbia.

The heat dome is perhaps the most obvious byproduct of climate change, although according to meteorologists the connection is not a straight line. Warmer atmospheric currents did not directly and immediately produce temperatures that reached 116 degrees Fahrenheit (46.7 Centigrade) in Portland, Oregon, on Monday, 108 degrees (42.2 C) in Seattle, and 121 degrees (49.4 C) in the village of Lytton in central B.C., the hottest temperature ever recorded anywhere in Canada.

Rather, global warming produced an indirect result, through a process described as the creation of an “omega block,” as powerful currents of air, the jet stream in the upper atmosphere, wobble under the impact of warming air in the north polar region, allowing a north-south flow of air which then loops back, in the shape of the Greek letter. The air in the nearly closed circle sinks towards the surface, trapping heat for a period of time (the heat dome). Temperatures rise far more sharply than would be expected based on previous weather patterns.

At its worst, portions of British Columbia, usually

temperate, forest-covered and ocean-cooled, were hotter for several days than Las Vegas, Nevada, nearly 1,500 miles to the south, and located in the Southwestern desert, without either significant vegetation or much cloud cover.

Climate change is a byproduct of human activity, particularly the burning of fossil fuels and other processes connected with industrialization. Alleviating it requires coordinated action on a global scale, action that would introduce the necessary changes into economic life. These are completely feasible from a technical standpoint and would not require any reduction in the standard of living of the great mass of the population. They would, however, impact on the profits and wealth of the capitalist class.

Global warming, like COVID-19, pays no attention to national borders. The global coordination needed to fight climate change collides with the framework of the capitalist nation-state system and, above all, with the drive by American imperialism to maintain its world domination against both its main rivals, China and Russia, and lesser imperialist powers like Germany, Japan, France and Britain.

The venality and incompetence of the financial elite is demonstrated in their response to the heat dome. Neither state and federal governments in the US nor provincial and federal governments in Canada have mobilized the necessary social resources to prepare for the type of extreme climate event seen over the past week or to alleviate its impact.

Washington and Oregon are under Democratic Party rule, as is the US federal government. These Democratic administrations have done little or nothing to safeguard their populations. Washington Governor Jay Inslee, who based his abortive presidential campaign on a single-issue emphasis on climate change, cannot even provide a count of the number of heat-related deaths in his state.

In Seattle, the largest city in the state, paramedics responded to 165 emergency heat-related calls on Monday alone, overwhelming the system, which handled only 91 such calls in all of 2020. As the heat wave moved east, driving temperatures to 109 degrees in Spokane on Tuesday, and 115 degrees in Lewiston, Idaho, the power company in that region, Avista, began “rolling blackouts” because its system could not handle the demand.

President Biden, at a previously scheduled meeting with Western state governors to discuss the upcoming wildfire season Wednesday, made only a passing reference to the heat crisis in those states. He announced, as his major initiative, raising the starting pay for those fighting forest fires to a miserable \$15 an hour—the same as his proposed

minimum wage.

Things are no better on the Canadian side of the border. British Columbia Premier John Horgan aroused widespread popular outrage when he commented, in response to the hundreds of heat-related deaths in the province, “Fatalities are part of life.” He went on to suggest that the danger of the heat wave was well known, and that people had to exercise “a level of personal responsibility” to stay safe—this in a region where relatively few people have home air conditioning.

Horgan heads a government of the New Democratic Party, the union-based social democratic party that has long abandoned any support for actual progressive reforms and competes with the Liberal and Conservative parties for the favor of big business. His remarks are just as crude and callous as the notorious statement by British Tory Prime Minister Boris Johnson, opposing any new lockdowns: “let the bodies pile high in their thousands.”

No section of the ruling class, or any of its political servants, has any solution to the crisis of world capitalism, which underlies global warming and such catastrophes as the heat dome, which are a warning of things to come. Extreme weather phenomena, like the coronavirus pandemic, demonstrate the completely outmoded character of world capitalism, and the necessity to put an end to this bankrupt system and its insatiably corrupt ruling class, and replace them with world socialism.



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