

# Sixteen years after Katrina: Hurricane Ida devastates southern Louisiana

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Hurricane Ida made landfall Sunday as the second most powerful storm to hit the state of Louisiana in its recorded history, bringing widespread flooding from heavy rains and storm surge. High winds, blowing debris and falling trees damaged buildings and knocked out power to one million customers in Louisiana and over 120,000 in Mississippi.

So far two deaths have been attributed to the storm, but the toll is expected to rise significantly as first responders search damaged homes and respond to emergency calls.

Catastrophic damage to the power grid is projected to leave the New Orleans area without power for weeks. All eight of the transmission lines that provide electricity to the city via wires that pass high overhead failed in the high winds, with one tower collapsing into the Mississippi River. While they wait in the sweltering summer heat for power to be restored, residents must rely on fuel generators that produce carbon monoxide and frequently lead to deadly poisoning when used improperly.

In response to the power failure, New Orleans Police Department Superintendent Shaun Ferguson announced Sunday night that "anti-looting" patrols would be deployed throughout the city and demanded that residents "shelter in place."

Upstream from New Orleans in Laplace, residents put out desperate pleas for rescue on social media. Rapidly rising floodwaters had forced them to seek refuge in their attics or on rooftops. Residents of Lafitte, south of the city, also found themselves stranded. Wind-strewn debris clogged the streets of Houma.

The storm, which originated on August 23 in the southwest Caribbean Sea, rapidly intensified into a hurricane that passed over western Cuba on Friday. Fed by the extremely warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico,

Ida strengthened even further as it took aim at the Louisiana Gulf Coast, with sustained wind speeds reaching 150 miles per hour, just shy of a Category 5 designation.

Climate change is warming the oceans and increasing the amount of moisture in the atmosphere, fueling larger hurricanes. The storm grew over waters in the Gulf that are well above average temperatures, following the hottest July and what is expected to be the hottest August on record.

The response of city and state officials to the hurricane was essentially "every man for himself." New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell announced on Friday that there was no time to implement contraflow on the freeways and a mandatory evacuation order for those living inside the city's levee system. Tens of thousands of residents were left to figure out how to evacuate on their own or ride out the storm in their homes. Mayor Cantrell estimated Monday that 200,000 residents remained in the city Sunday night.

Not only did Ida mark the first time in US history that hurricanes with sustained winds of 150 mph hit a state in back-to-back seasons, following Hurricane Laura, which brought widespread destruction to Lake Charles in August 2020, it also made landfall 16 years to the day after Hurricane Katrina hit the state, destroying much of the city of New Orleans.

Hurricane Katrina's storm surge breached the levee system, inundating entire neighborhoods in toxic floodwaters, stranding residents on their rooftops who waited to be rescued by boat or airlifted by the National Guard. Thousands, with nowhere else to go, were stranded in squalid conditions at the Superdome stadium. Patients were trapped in hospitals that had lost power or been inundated with flood water.

More than 1,800 people died in the social catastrophe

that unfolded in the wake of the storm's landfall, making it one of the deadliest "natural disasters" in American history. This mass suffering was met by the homicidal indifference and criminal incompetence which Americans and the world have come to expect from the US government.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained as the disaster was unfolding:

The decisive components of the present tragedy are social and political, not natural. The American ruling elite has for the past three decades been dismantling whatever forms of government regulation and social welfare had been instituted in the preceding period. The present catastrophe is the terrible product of this social and political retrogression.

The lessons derived from past natural and economic calamities—from the deadly floods of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the dust bowl and Depression of the 1930s—have been repudiated and derided by a ruling elite driven by the crisis of its profit system to subordinate ever more ruthlessly all social concerns to the extraction of profit and accumulation of personal wealth.

More than a decade and half later, these processes have reached an even higher, and deadlier, level, with every aspect of society subordinated to the piling up of ever greater mountains of corporate profit and private wealth. The 16 years after Katrina have seen no improvement of the country's crumbling social infrastructure, leaving millions at the mercy of intensifying storms, heat waves and fires fueled by climate change.

A series of catastrophes testifies to the state of American society: the collapse of the Texas power grid during a cold snap in February which left 4.5 million people without power and killed more than 700; the flooding of Houston, Texas in 2017 by Hurricane Harvey, which killed more than 100; the collapse of Puerto Rico's power grid after Hurricane Maria, resulting in more than 3,000 deaths; the Camp Fire in 2018, triggered by faulty power lines, which destroyed

the town of Paradise, California and killed 85.

This year, hundreds died in the Pacific Northwest and British Columbia under the pressure of a record-breaking heat wave. Regular summer rains in Detroit, Michigan have overwhelmed infrastructure, repeatedly flooding freeways and basements. The wildfire season in the Western US is set to be the largest on record, with more than 1.7 million acres burned in California alone.

Most significantly, under the guise of "herd immunity" or "mitigation," the COVID-19 pandemic has been allowed by the ruling class to run rampant through the American population, killing more than 650,000 people in less than two years by the official tally. As Hurricane Ida bore down on Louisiana, hospitals were already overfilled with COVID-19 patients, leaving little room for victims of the storm. After the intensive care unit at one hospital lost generator power, patients had to be hand bagged, or manually resuscitated, until they could be moved to a floor with electricity.

The inability of capitalism to confront the consequences of seasonal storms and climate change, which has exacerbated weather phenomena in line with repeated warnings made by scientists, has been laid bare. The pandemic shows that capitalist society—in which every consideration is subordinated to private profit—is incapable of dealing with the problems which confront humanity in a progressive manner.

Only the working class, armed with a socialist program, can transform society to save lives, meet human need and resolve the burning issues of our time.



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