

Over 100 feared dead as recovery efforts continue following massive tornado outbreak across the US Midwest and South

Zac Thorton
13 December 2021

Details continue to emerge following a series of deadly late-season tornadoes that touched down during the evening on Friday, December 10 in several areas across the US Midwest and the South. The tornadic supercell traveled through six states, leaving wide swathes of destruction and devastating the lives of thousands.

While the total number of deaths remains unclear, it is estimated that over 100 people have perished, and many remain missing. According to Kentucky governor Andy Beshear, more than 1,000 homes were destroyed across the state. “When this tornado hit, it didn’t just take a roof off, which is what we’ve seen in the past,” Beshear said at a press conference Monday. “It exploded the whole house. People, animals, the rest—just gone.”

Tens of thousands of those who did not lose their homes to high winds remain without power as power lines were downed across the region.

The majority of fatalities that have been recorded so far occurred in Kentucky, with a reported 74 deaths, although this figure is expected to climb as 105 people have yet to be located. Eight of the deaths were among those killed at the Mayfield Consumer Products candle factory in Mayfield, Kentucky.

At least ten workers there remain unaccounted for. The factory, whose customers include Bed, Bath & Beyond, had employees working around the clock under sweatshop conditions in order to meet the demands of the holiday shopping season. Workers were told to shelter in place just minutes before the tornado decimated the factory.

In anticipation of the coming storms, workers began pleading with management as early as 5:30 p.m.—hours

before the tornado struck—to allow them to leave the facility. Management responded by threatening to fire any workers who left.

“People had questioned if they could leave or go home,” McKayla Emery, a 21-year-old worker at the plant told NBC News in a an interview from a hospital bed where she is recovering from injuries.

“I asked to leave and they told me I’d be fired,” Elijah Johnson, 20, explained to NBC News. “Even with weather like this, you’re still going to fire me?” Johnson asked. The reply from the manager was “Yes.”

Initially, workers took shelter in hallways and bathrooms. However, once supervisors assumed that the threat had ended, workers were sent back on the production floor.

The “Quad-State” tornado touched down in northeastern Arkansas, entering the southeastern tip of Missouri before crossing briefly into Tennessee, and then traveling some 200 miles through Kentucky. Preliminary assessments have indicated that the tornado was likely an EF4, although this could be revised to EF5, the highest rating on the Enhanced Fujita (EF) scale.

The National Weather Service states that an EF5 is characterized by “Strong frame houses lifted off foundations, carried considerable distances, and disintegrated; auto-sized missiles airborne for several hundred feet or more; trees debarked,” and with three-second gusts of over 200 miles per hour. In Mayfield, debris was launched as high as 37,000 feet, and many homes were ripped from their foundations, leaving only concrete slabs.

Chris Smiley, the mayor of Dawson Springs, Kentucky, which is located roughly one hour northwest

of Mayfield, reported that “about 75 percent of the community was wiped out.” According to the US Census Bureau, Dawson Springs has a population of 2,452 as of 2019, and a median household income of \$25,221.

Yesterday it was reported that 2-year-old Oaklynn Koon of Dawson Springs succumbed to injuries she sustained in the storm, making her the state’s youngest reported victim. According to press reports, the family was taking shelter in their bathroom when they were suddenly launched from their home.

Governor Beshear has mobilized 300 Kentucky National Guard troops across nine counties to assist in the recovery efforts. In a press conference held on Sunday, Beshear stated that there were “about 36-50 thousand Kentuckians without power.” While official estimates have yet to be made, it is likely that damages will be in the billions of dollars.

In addition to the National Guard, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is also conducting operations. Speaking to CNN, Michael Dossett, director of Kentucky Emergency Management, said, “The devastation is quite frankly something that you would see in a war zone. This is an event where we had commercial and residence properties literally stripped clean from the earth.”

In Edwardsville, Illinois, a tornado ripped through an Amazon distribution warehouse, leaving six workers dead. Satellite before-and-after photos show that virtually half the warehouse was destroyed. It is unclear how many were present at the warehouse when it was struck, but the facility employs roughly 190 across multiple shifts. Amazon typically employs the most workers during the Christmas holiday season, the majority as contractors through over 3,000 contracting firms.

The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has opened an investigation into the collapse of the Amazon fulfillment center. The investigation could take up to six months and could result in a nominal, wrist-slap citation and fines for the trillion-dollar company.

Since the 1950s there have been at least 21 late-season December tornado outbreaks, coming an average of once every three years or so. F5/EF5 tornados remain rare, with just 59 recorded in the US since 1950. The deadliest tornado since 1947, rated an

EF5, ripped through Joplin, Missouri in 2011, killing 158 people.

Scientists have long pointed to the connections between human-induced climate change and the increasing phenomena of extreme weather events. However, scientists have so far been unable to determine a direct link between tornado activity and climate change. A report published by Carbon Brief states that “there is no observable increase in the number of strong tornadoes in the US over the past few decades,” while at the same time tornadoes have become more clustered and intense.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact