Winter storm wreaks havoc across Southeastern US

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Snowstorms and tornadoes blasted through the southeast region over the weekend, leaving dozens of homes destroyed and hundreds of thousands without power in several states, including Florida, the Carolinas and Georgia. In Florida, officials reported more than 100 homes had been damaged while more than 200 people were displaced after multiple tornadoes ripped through the state's southwest region.

In North Carolina, as much as 10 inches of snow fell in some areas along the state's western region, with many roads in the central and western part of the state being covered with ice. A spokesman for the North Carolina highway patrol said that by mid-afternoon the agency had responded to 300 car crashes and nearly 800 calls for service. Two people died on Sunday when their car skidded off the road and into trees along a median east of Raleigh, North Carolina's capital. The driver and passenger, both 41-year-old South Carolina residents, were pronounced dead at the scene.

More than 260,000 residents were without power by mid-afternoon Sunday across the impacted states, according to *poweroutage.us*, which fell to about 150,000 residents by Sunday night and was largely restarted by Tuesday. In Tennessee, there were multiple reports of abandoned and wrecked cars on snow-covered roads.

In South Carolina, more than 90,000 homes and businesses statewide were reported without power Sunday afternoon. Derreck Becker, spokesperson for the South Carolina's Emergency Management Division, said Monday that while there were no reports of storm-related deaths, several traffic incidents had been confirmed and many of them included injured people who had to be sent to the hospital.

The counties that suffered the most from the weather disasters in Florida were Charlotte and Lee, which is home to Fort Myers. Tornado warnings had first been issued across Charlotte County just after 7:00 a.m. and continued until noon, moving south into Collier County and Lee County. In total, 21 emergency warnings were issued by the National Weather Service, which confirmed that at least five tornadoes had raced through the three counties, with the most destructive occurring in Fort Myers.

At a Sunday news conference, Cecil Pendergrass, co-chairman of Florida's Lee County Board of Commissioners, said at least 62 homes were currently "unlivable." Approximately 7,000 homes were left without power throughout the state's southwest region, and hundreds remained without electricity into Monday. At least 108 mobile homes were damaged, 30 which were completely destroyed, and another 51 homes sustained major damage. It is estimated that the storm caused $1.6 million worth of damage in all three counties.

Sunday's storm contained one of the strongest tornadoes to hit Florida since 2016. An EF-2 tornado ran across Fort Myers at around 8:00 a.m. and mostly impacted the Iona McGregor Fire District area. From there, the tornado swiveled through three mobile home communities after moving northeast of McGregor Blvd. and Summerlin Road. The EF-2 cyclone carried wind gusts of 118 mph and stretched 1.8 miles.

The National Weather Service concluded that an EF-2 tornado had in fact touched down on the area after assessing the harm inflicted by the storm. Despite being on the lower end of tornadoes in regard to intensity, EF-2s are usually stronger than most tropical storms and can destroy relatively well-built infrastructure. Tornadoes of this magnitude are capable of tearing roofs off houses, destroying mobile homes, and lifting cars off the ground.

Numerous videos circulated on social media the past few days documenting the destruction wrought on hundreds of homes and buildings from the tornadoes, with pieces of rooftops and debris torn off and scattered around neighborhood streets. Many residents expressed shock at

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the approaching storm as it was happening, highlighting the obvious lack of forewarning to alert the public. One Twitter user noted they awoke in panicked alarm after receiving a tornado warning at 6:00 a.m. Sunday advising them to hide in a shelter, just hours before the tornado started circling.

In one ghastly eye-witness account, Edward Murray, a resident from one of the trailer parks in south Fort Myers, told *Naples Daily News* how close he and his family came to dying from the tornados. Murray mentioned their mobile home was lifted from its foundation when a tornado picked up the structure and tossed it on top of a neighbor's home. Turning to his home he said: "That's my house that's turned upside down. The tornado took me off my feet, blew me toward the east wall and buried me under the sink, refrigerator, kitchen chairs and everything else."

Significantly, the agencies responsible for preparing for and responding to weather-related disasters have had their funding stripped to the bone in recent years. In the summer of 2020, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed a state budget that contained over $1 billion in vetoes for critical public programs, including emergency response units. Some $3.5 million was cut from the state's Emergency Operations Center, which local agencies rely on heavily during hurricanes, storms, and other weather-related threats.

Police and other local officials made comments in the storm's aftermath speaking positively about how no missing persons or deaths had been reported in Florida. However, this does not account for the fact that many residents are repeatedly left to fend for themselves against such deadly inclement weather. The inability of capitalism to protect the population from inclement weather is part of a broader failure, exemplified above all by the negligent and homicidal response of the political establishment to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The latest wave of destructive weather recalls the deadly winter storm that tore through Texas in February 2021 that drew national outrage over the massive failure of the state's electricity grid to withstand the predictable inclement weather event. Texas's winter storm Uri led to widespread blackouts and killed 700 people.

Compounding the failures to prevent such crises is the inability of capitalism to deal with and reverse the consequences of human-induced climate change. Moreover, even as severe winter weather becomes more common, utility companies and state regulators refuse to implement measures to plan for and prevent such catastrophes.

This is epitomized in Florida, where the official government response to storms, like the incredible spread of COVID transmission amid the Omicron wave, has been characterized by utter indifference. In the only official statement made on the weekend's storms, Governor DeSantis made a short and hollow gesture of sympathy for those affected. Many noted that the tweet referred to the storms as hitting the day before when they had hit the day he tweeted, highlighting the meaninglessness of the gesture.

In the same tweet, DeSantis said that he had "immediately sent a response team" and that his "administration will do all we can to provide resources to families." The bulk of the replies under the tweet were laced with scornful hostility, with many drawing a connection to the criminal response of DeSantis to the pandemic and the policy of letting the virus rip through the population without any regard for human life.

One reply said sardonically that "if only there was an immediate response to a deadly pandemic how many Floridians could have been saved." Another reply lambasted the administration and the governor's team of public health experts, many of whom are avid supporters of "herd immunity" and mass infection, for their refusal to provide masks, testing and vaccines to the population.

Responding to the point he was "praying for the families impacted by yesterday's severe weather in SWFL," one Twitter user commented: "It would be nice if you prayed for Floridians who lost family & friends, children, parents, teachers…from covid. Never heard you mention them." Like nearly every other state, Florida is seeing an explosive growth of hospitalizations in recent days from the pandemic surge, which is straining health care systems and putting countless lives at risk, with both the Republican and Democratic parties washing their hands of mass death.

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