

Tornadoes in central Iowa kill 7, cause extensive damage

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6 March 2022

At least three tornadoes swept through central Iowa Sunday, March 5, knocking down power lines, uprooting trees, demolishing buildings and leaving seven people dead. The National Weather Service in the state's capital, Des Moines, categorized the tornadoes as high as EF-3, with winds over 135 miles per hour capable of causing severe damage.

The first tornado touched down in Madison County, southwest of Des Moines, at about 4:30 p.m. It struck the town of Winterset with a population of 6,000, killing six, including two children under the age of 5. Over two dozen homes were destroyed and another four adults were injured.

Another tornado hit further east in Lucas County where the seventh death occurred. The wider thunderstorm caused damage in the Des Moines suburb of Norwalk and power outages affected some 10,000 people across the metropolitan area.

March marks the beginning of the tornado season in the US which traditionally extends through June. Last year Iowa experienced 12 tornadoes—with some reaching speeds of 145 miles per hour—during the month of July causing severe damage. On July 19, 2018, 21 tornadoes ravaged the state causing 22 injuries in a single day.

Last weekend's tornadoes are not uncommon but are considered rare in Iowa this early in the year. March occurrences normally appear further south as the weather warms and then extend north.

Iowa is one of the states that comprises the central US region termed "Tornado Alley." Southern and southeastern portions are referred to as "Dixie Alley." But more recently, scientists have noted the geographical range of tornadoes has shifted east from Tornado Alley into the Ohio and Tennessee river valleys.

The designation "EF-3" refers to the enhanced Fujita scale used by meteorologists to categorize the intensity of tornadoes. EF-0 has wind speeds of 65–85 miles per hour, with the highest rank of EF-5 registering wind speeds greater than 200 miles per hour.

Scientists do not fully understand the exact causes of a tornado, or whether climate change is having a direct effect on their frequency or intensity. But they do know the ingredients that lead to tornadoes.

The temperature of water in the Pacific Ocean plays a role in driving weather across the globe—known as the El Niño-Southern Oscillation. The jet stream supplies wind while the Gulf of Mexico supplies moisture. In the case of the Gulf, rising global temperatures have increased the amount of moisture in the atmosphere, which contributes to more severe thunderstorms. Rotating thunderstorms, known as supercells, are what create the conditions that can lead to tornadoes.

Last December, deadly storms ravaged communities of Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio and Tennessee. At least 90 people were killed, including eight workers at Mayfield Consumer Products in Mayfield, Kentucky, and six Amazon workers at an Edwardsville, Illinois, fulfillment center outside St. Louis, Missouri.

These weather events can and must be predicted by scientists and meteorologists to better prepare communities and develop the infrastructure to warn residents with ample time beforehand to seek shelter. However, such catastrophes are themselves the end results of the criminal negligence of federal, state and local governments, Democratic and Republican alike, whose budget cuts and lack of planning only worsen the impact of extreme weather events.

The recurrence of these events demonstrates that it is not a question of if they will happen again, but when.

But extreme weather events, as harmful as they are to society from an environmental standpoint, are further exacerbated by the deepening social crisis of capitalism—social inequality, the ravages of war and declining health care. Today, this is greatly magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Already in Iowa, contractors warn the disruption of global supply chains will affect the ability to obtain needed insulation and roofing for repairs to housing. The question of insurance companies seeking to evade the costs of making homeowners whole is present. And the onset of inflation will cast workers' living conditions deeper into poverty. Such conditions and experiences are a damning exposure of the capitalist system which leaves the working class and poor to fend for themselves, with only minimum warnings and little infrastructure for safety from predictable and knowable dangers. Only an independent movement of the working class fighting for the socialist transformation of society can prevent future catastrophes.



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