

Flood catastrophe in eastern Kentucky worsens

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The death count from the devastating floods that hit eastern Kentucky last week has risen to 37, the state's governor confirmed Monday night, with hundreds of victims still unaccounted for. Governor Andy Beshear said refrigerator trucks are serving as mobile morgues to hold bodies before they are flown to the medical examiner's office in the state capital of Frankfort.

"We are going to be finding bodies for weeks, many of them swept hundreds of yards, maybe a quarter of a mile plus from where they were last," Beshear told CNN earlier this week.

Efforts to find those still alive or to recover bodies are being hindered by hot temperatures and the threats of another round of severe storms, which could bring more rain, high winds and flash floods.

Scores of bridges have already been washed away, entire towns remain under water and tens of thousands of residents of the mountainous region still have no power, clean water or cell phone access. The governor said clean water was a priority and also confirmed that 12,000 state residents still did not have electricity as of Monday.

At the same time, resources provided by state and federal authorities are wholly inadequate. Only a handful of shelters have been set up and many are sleeping in their vehicles or in the rough. Just 14 emergency shelters are open assisting 483 people. Displaced residents are also sheltering in state parks, schools, churches and community centers.

Many residents are relying on charities for food and the assistance of neighbors and volunteers. Few if any residents have flood insurance to fix houses which were inundated with water and mud or swept off their foundations, carried downstream and smashed to pieces.

The victims who have been identified range from infants to retirees in their 80s. Among the dead are four children from the Noble family—Madison, 8; Riley Jr., 6; Neveah, 4; Chance, 2—who were swept out of the arms of their parents in Knott County.

"Lots of people live in mobile homes, and they were absolutely destroyed," a disabled coal miner in nearby

Martin County told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "It looks like someone dammed up a river and whole hollows are underwater. Families have multiple losses and many of the dead might never be found."

The residents of Appalachian mining regions are no strangers to flash flooding after heavy rainfalls. Mountain top removal and other forms of stripmining, along with other environmentally damaging methods employed by the coal operators, have long facilitated such disasters. Fifty years ago, on February 26, 1972, heavy rains caused coal slurry dams owned by Pittston Coal to burst sending 132 million gallons of black wastewater on the residents of 16 coal towns along Buffalo Creek Hollow in Logan County, West Virginia, killing 125 residents, injuring 1,121 and making 4,000 homeless.

From July 26 to July 28 between 7 and 10 inches of rain fell in parts of eastern Kentucky, most of which occurred in just a few hours early last Thursday morning. The heavy rainfalls were described as "a hundred-year" or "once-in-a-lifetime" flood. Such events are supposed to have a 1 percent chance of being equalled or exceeded within a year. But as Hazard, Kentucky, writer Mandi Fugate Sheffel noted in the *Lexington Herald Leader* earlier this week, flooding in the region in 2020, 2021 and 2022 "could all fall in this category." Indeed, in the same week, storms in St. Louis dumped 25 percent of the city's annual rainfall onto streets in 12 hours, the most to hit the city in more than a century. Las Vegas was also hit by "monsoonal rains" and 71 mph wind gusts, flooding casinos and streets and knocking out power to 16,000 city residents.

Climate change driven largely by the burning of fossil fuels is leading to the greater frequency and severity of weather events in the US and around the world. The warming of the atmosphere allows the skies to hold more moisture, leading to dumping of greater amounts of water when it rains. "This means the risk of flooding is going up dramatically over much of the planet where people live, and Kentucky is one of those places," Jonathan Overpeck, an earth and environmental sciences professor at the University

of Michigan, told *Inside Climate News*.

The US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine has been used by the Biden administration and capitalist governments around the world to ramp up the production of coal, oil and natural gas production. Last week, West Virginia Democratic Senator Joe Manchin did a turnaround and signaled his support for Biden's supposedly groundbreaking health, climate and corporate tax proposal. His vote was assured by a commitment from Biden and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi that Congress would approve separate measures to revamp permits for energy infrastructure projects, which would "could ease the way for a project in which Manchin has taken a personal interest, the Mountain Valley Pipeline, which would transport Appalachian shale gas from West Virginia to Virginia," the *New York Times* reported.

The residents of eastern Kentucky have long suffered from the brutal consequences of American capitalism. Sixty years ago, social democrat Michael Harrington pleaded in his book, *The Other America*, for the Kennedy administration to address the poverty in the inner-city ghettos, migrant labor camps and Appalachian coalfields. The "War on Poverty" and "Great Society" reforms, introduced by Kennedy's successor Lyndon Johnson, were wrecked by the cost of the Vietnam War and the mounting crisis of American capitalism. Social reform turned to class war by the 1980s, with the Democrats joining the Republicans in social counterrevolution aimed at wrenching back all the gains won by the working class over generations of struggle.

The coal miners, long the most militant and class-conscious sections of the American working class, were a major target of this attack. The miners defied President Carter's Taft-Hartley back-to-work order during their 111-day strike in 1977-78. For this reason, Reagan avoided a direct clash with the miners during the 1981 strike. Instead the Republican president took on and smashed a much smaller union with no history of mass struggle, the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO), after assurances from the AFL-CIO bureaucracy that they would do nothing to oppose the government unionbusting.

During the subsequent AT Massey (1984-85) and Pittston (1989-90) strikes, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) deliberately isolated and defeated striking miners to secure "labor peace" and American "competitiveness." What followed was a massive restructuring of the coal industry with the UMWA collaborating with the coal bosses and Wall Street sharks who used the bankruptcy courts to strip miners of their jobs, wages and pensions. Today, eastern Kentucky, once a stronghold of the UMWA and home to the "Bloody Harlan County Coal War" of the 1930s, no longer has any active union coal miners in the

state.

In its relentless effort to divide the working class and block a movement against the capitalist system, the Democrats claim poverty and all social problems are caused by racism and "white privilege." But a look at flood-ravaged counties of eastern Kentucky whose residents are almost entirely white blows up these reactionary myths. Leslie County, whose 9,055 residents are 98 percent white, has a poverty rate of 40.64 percent. The per capita income in the county is \$18,000. This is a third of US per capita income of \$53,504. The rest of the counties affected by the floods also have chronically high poverty rates: Clay (35.88 percent), Breathitt (35.92 percent), Letcher (35.67 percent), Knott (32.37 percent) and Perry (27.5 percent).

Along with crushing poverty is the impact of the opioid crisis in the Appalachia. In 2020, fatal drug overdoses in Kentucky surged 50 percent, with 1,964 residents dying, according to authorities. Another 16,352 Kentuckians have died from COVID-19 since the pandemic started due to the indifference of the corporations and the political establishment.

Democratic Governor Andy Beshear and the Biden administration, which is spending trillions on war and corporate bailouts, will do nothing seriously to address the crisis in eastern Kentucky or to make the residents whole.

The continued environmental disasters, along with surging inflation, social inequality and the consequences of the ongoing pandemic, are driving millions of workers around the world into struggle against capitalism and the sacrifice of human life for corporate profit. To fight, the working class needs an international and socialist strategy. The giant energy monopolies must be transformed into publicly owned utilities and vast resources freed up in the US and around the world to convert to clean energy sources and guarantee good jobs and living wages to all workers.



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