

Devastation from Hurricane Ian: Billions are needed for relief, not war!

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Hurricane Ian has inflicted a catastrophe in Florida, with a large but as yet uncounted death toll, and massive destruction of homes, buildings, vehicles and infrastructure. Millions across Florida remain without power and many were left trapped in their homes due to widespread flooding. This is not simply a “natural disaster,” but was prepared by the staggering negligence of government officials at both the state and federal level.

The storm made landfall on Wednesday as a dangerous category 4, with maximum winds only 2 miles per hour below Category 5, and hit much of southwest Florida with significant flooding, a threateningly high storm surge and powerful winds in its first few hours. Poweroutage.us reported almost 2.4 million customers in the state without electricity Thursday, including nearly everyone in coastal Lee County and Charlotte County, where the cities of Fort Myers and Punta Gorda are located, respectively.

The southwest counties worst hit by the storm have seen a huge increase in population and urbanization over the past 25 years, with nearly 1 million people living in Lee and Charlotte counties alone. A significant share of the population is crowded into neighborhoods built in the low-lying coastal areas which were inundated by record-breaking storm surge flooding Wednesday.

Cheap mobile homes and trailer parks were left especially vulnerable, without any measures taken to evacuate residents systematically. Everything was left to “individual responsibility,” meaning that the poor, the ill and the bedridden were left to fend for themselves.

Instead of systematic efforts to evacuate residents, officials in Orange County, which includes Orlando, resorted to inadequate check-ins for mobile homeowners, passing out informational flyers and “encouraging” residents to relocate in the face of the hurricane.

After Ian pummeled the southwest and caused wide-scale flooding in central Florida, it finished its west-to-east crossing of the peninsula and reemerged in the Atlantic Ocean. There it began to pick up energy from warm waters and turned to the north-northwest. It is expected to make a

second landfall in South Carolina on Friday.

The first estimates of deaths—the sheriff of Lee County indicated that “hundreds” had likely died in his jurisdiction alone—have been largely hushed up by the media, which appears to be under an injunction not to alert the American public about the scale of the catastrophe.

However, while speaking Thursday at Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) headquarters in Washington, President Joe Biden said he was “hearing early reports of what may be substantial loss of life” and referred to Ian as potentially “the deadliest hurricane in Florida’s history.”

If that turns out to be true, the death toll would surpass the more than 2,500 killed by the Okeechobee hurricane of 1928. It was so named because the bulk of the victims were migrant farmworkers, mainly African-American, drowned by flooding from the huge South Florida lake caused by the storm as it crossed the state east to west, from the Atlantic to the Gulf of Mexico.

Biden has signed a disaster declaration for all 67 Florida counties, making them eligible for federal emergency funds. But any such aid will be dwarfed by the scale of the damage, which is likely to run into the tens if not hundreds of billions of dollars.

The actual priorities of the Biden administration—and the capitalist ruling class as a whole—are demonstrated by the decision to spend more than \$50 billion for the war in Ukraine, a sum that far exceeds all rescue and recovery efforts in all natural disasters this year. The continuing resolution passed by the Senate Thursday provided another \$12 billion for Ukraine and only \$2 billion more for disaster relief for hurricanes, floods, wildfires and earthquakes.

The working class must reject these priorities and demand the immediate cancellation of all US funding for the war in Ukraine, with the funds diverted to meet the urgent social needs that are evident from the pictures and video already pouring in from Florida’s hurricane disaster zone.

Videos on social media from homeowners in Naples have shown their backyards inundated with water and doors plowed through by rushing water. Emergency officials in

Fort Myers Beach reported Thursday morning that they expected to find bodies piled in the rubble of the homes wiped out in the coastal area.

In Port Charlotte, HCA Florida Fawcett Hospital saw its lower-level emergency room flooded while intense winds tore into parts of its fourth floor roof, exposing its intensive care unit to the elements, according to a physician. Countless staff and the hospital's sickest patients, some of whom were on ventilators, were forced to evacuate to other floors.

The disaster in Florida is another demonstration of the failure of capitalist society to address the predictable environmental consequences of climate change and global warming. This year alone, hundreds of thousands in Jackson, Mississippi were left without running water after record rainfall collapsed the sewage system, while unprecedented “heat domes” fueled forest fires across the West.

In Florida, state and local officials, both Republicans and Democrats, have made zero strides in revamping the state’s preparedness protocols and buildings after being slammed by prior storms. In 2017, Hurricane Irma cut a swath right through the peninsula, killing nearly 100 people and causing billions of dollars in damage. In 2018, Hurricane Michael destroyed sparsely populated areas of Florida’s panhandle as a category 5 hurricane, the highest intensity.

Like all recent “natural” disasters, Hurricane Ian has exposed both the incapability of capitalist society to apply the proper planning and organization needed to safeguard the population and the criminal indifference of the ruling class to human life.

Seventeen years ago, the Bush administration shocked the world by its indifference to the destruction of New Orleans caused by Hurricane Katrina, with nearly 1,800 dead and tens of thousands left stranded and ignored, trapped in their homes without food or water, forced to cling to rooftops with no means to escape the floodwaters.

In the coronavirus pandemic, this indifference has escalated into a homicidal frenzy. Both the Trump and Biden administrations have presided over a negligent and criminal response, which has already sacrificed more than 1 million lives to a preventable infection, in order to ensure that businesses remain open to rack up profits and billionaires continue to amass even greater wealth.

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, who hopes to replace Trump as the leader of an American version of fascism, has spearheaded the rejection of even the most minimal COVID-19 mitigation measures. He is responsible for more than 7 million infections and more than 81,000 deaths. The governor must regard a few thousand hurricane deaths as a footnote by comparison.

Despite the occasional “green” gestures by the Biden administration, nothing has been done by the Democrats to

address the growing impact of climate change. The Democrats refuse to enact any measures on climate change that would cut into the profits of giant American corporations or threaten the wealth of the billionaires.

The Biden administration and the Democratic Party routinely refer to the climate change deniers in the Republican Party as their “colleagues” and “friends” and seek bipartisan collaboration with them. On Thursday, Biden voiced more platitudes about how Americans would “pull together as one team.”

Meanwhile, extraordinary rainfall and deadlier storms are becoming more common as climate change is pushing global temperatures to unprecedented levels. Warmer temperatures have led to increased air moisture, leading to historic rainfall.

Climate scientists have warned that the rise in ocean temperatures is fueling stronger storms both in speed and intensity. Hurricane Ian’s maximum wind speed increased by 35 mph in less than three hours, going from a Category 3 to a strong Category 4 as the storm was approaching Florida Wednesday morning.

It is an indictment of capitalism that despite society’s vast technological advances, the social conditions that led to thousands of deaths from the Okeechobee hurricane nearly a century ago have not been resolved.

The only way forward to prevent environmental catastrophe is to expropriate the trillions hoarded by the corporations and banks, abolish the anarchy of the profit system and establish a socialist planned economy on a world scale which can take the necessary measures to reduce global warming and protect the world’s population.



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