

Hurricane Ian and the American ruling elite's malign neglect

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The death toll in Florida from Hurricane Ian rose to 101 on Monday, five days after the powerful Category 4 storm ripped through the Cape Coral-Fort Myers area, a region of 1 million people. The storm cut a swath of damage across central Florida before heading back into the Atlantic and making another landfall in South Carolina. The death toll is expected to surge as search and rescue crews continue to go door to door looking for casualties and survivors.

In its first hours Wednesday, Ian brought sustained winds of 115 mph (185 km/h), more than 30 inches of rain in some places and a monstrous 12-foot storm surge which swallowed thousands of homes and washed away boats far inland. Houses were blown apart or battered off their foundations by the waves. At the peak, more than 2.4 million Floridians were left without power. Current estimates place the damage caused by the storm at more than \$63 billion.

Despite advance warnings from meteorologists that the rapidly strengthening storm was tracking towards southwest Florida, officials in Lee County, which includes Cape Coral and Fort Myers, did not issue a mandatory evacuation order for areas which would be affected by coastal flooding until 24 hours before landfall. This left tens of thousands little time to take action, putting countless lives at risk.

As is the case in every storm in the United States, with no financial support on offer to assist in evacuation, the poor, the homeless, the elderly and those without access to a car or a bus had no option but to survive the storm in whatever way they could. Many had to climb into the attics of their homes as flood waters rapidly rose, while others were battered by the wind and waves as they rode out the storm on their boats.

After a quiet start, the 2022 Atlantic hurricane season

is shaping up to be one of the deadliest and costliest in American history.

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Less than two weeks before Ian hit Florida, the US territory of Puerto Rico suffered an immense blow from Hurricane Fiona, another Category 4 storm. It knocked out all power to the island and killed 25 people. Coming almost exactly five years to the day after catastrophic Hurricane Maria, which killed nearly 3,000 people across the island, Fiona brought devastating flooding, wiping out much of the limited recovery from the earlier storm. The hurricane also wreaked havoc in Atlantic Canada, where it killed three and caused more than \$2 billion in destruction.

President Joe Biden traveled to Ponce, Puerto Rico on Monday to survey the situation, telling an audience, "We have to ensure when the next hurricane hits Puerto Rico, we are ready." However, all he announced was a mere \$60 million in federal aid, a pittance in the face of the estimated \$10 billion in damage and the more than \$12 billion just approved by Congress to escalate the war against Russia in Ukraine. Biden is planning to visit Florida on Wednesday with just as little on offer.

On Sunday, Biden's director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Deanna Criswell, announced on CNN's "State of the Union" that almost everyone in the country should purchase flood insurance, effectively admitting that tens of millions of people are on their own. "If you live near water or where it rains, it can certainly flood," Criswell said, noting, "Just because you're not required to buy flood insurance doesn't mean you don't have the option to buy it."

Currently, the federal government will cover less than \$40,000 in rebuilding costs and another \$40,000 for

property damage for those without flood insurance. This means most of those families impacted by Ian and Fiona will not be made whole and will be left struggling to recover for years to come.

Meanwhile, all former governor and current Florida Republican Senator Rick Scott had to suggest was a proposal for stricter building codes and a crackdown on “fraud” committed by consumers in the insurance market, making it harder for those affected by storms to get the financial support to which they are entitled.

Once again, faced with a predictable catastrophe and repeated warnings, the American ruling elite has made clear its homicidal indifference to the health and safety of the population. As with the “let it rip” approach to the pandemic, which has resulted in more than 1 million unnecessary deaths, the residents of Florida were left to their fate in the face of Hurricane Ian. There was no plan to evacuate the most vulnerable among the population, many of whom are elderly and disabled.

The Democrats’ promises to confront climate change have collapsed even as its deadly effects are increasingly being felt in the United States and around the world. Nothing is being done to protect the population from climate change and even less is being done to combat the fossil fuel emissions that are driving it. Corporate speculators and investors expect to continue to profit off the build-up of entire cities like Cape Coral and Fort Myers, which scientists have warned are highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, including sea level rise and the intensification of hurricanes.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls for the immediate allocation of billions of dollars to provide emergency assistance to all those impacted by the storms in Puerto Rico, Florida and elsewhere. Full restitution must be provided to all those who have had their homes damaged or destroyed. Emergency housing must be provided to all those affected, free of charge.

To address the ongoing danger of hurricanes, hundreds of billions must be allocated to build up social infrastructure. When a hurricane approaches, it cannot be left up to individuals to find a way out its path on their own. Emergency evacuation systems must be in place for all hurricane-prone areas to provide anyone under danger with access to free transportation and safe shelter.

Such a system can be paid for by ending of the hundreds of billions spent every year on the American military and its instruments of death and destruction. We call for an immediate end to the tens of billions of dollars that are being sent to Ukraine to wage the escalating US-NATO war against Russia, which threatens the world with nuclear annihilation.

Finally, to deal with the threat posed by climate change, the SEP calls for the expropriation of the big banks and large corporations and their transformation into public utilities under the democratic control of the working class. Through their labor, workers around the world produce all of the wealth of society. They must take control of this wealth and put it to use in the interests of all of humanity. Only by transforming the economy and reorganizing it on a scientific and socialist foundation will countless lives be saved and disasters like the aftermath of Ian and Fiona be averted.



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