

Fort Myers resident speaks of Hurricane Ian and its aftermath: “It was a catastrophe waiting to happen”

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The World Socialist Web Site spoke to Francine, a resident of Fort Myers, Florida on October 8, 10 days after Hurricane Ian ripped across the southwest Florida Gulf Coast region, with Lee County, including Fort Myers and Cape Coral, bearing the brunt of the category-four storm's 120-mile/hour winds, 30 inches of rain and 12-foot storm surge.

Federal and state authorities have done their best to cover up the death toll from the hurricane, but as of October 18 it was generally acknowledged that at least 129 people had been killed by the storm in Florida, making Ian the deadliest hurricane to hit the state since the Labor Day hurricane of 1935.

In addition to the Florida fatalities, five were killed in Cuba, five in North Carolina and one in Virginia.

Francine and her husband David are among the hundreds of thousands of seniors who have moved to the Fort Myers-Cape Coral region in recent years amid a frenzied growth of condominium communities and real estate speculation that has pushed the population of Lee County to more than 1 million.

Though the communities catering to retired and semi-retired people have multiplied, and the ranks of poverty-wage service workers, many of them immigrants, have mushroomed, nothing has been done to protect the region's residents from the impact of global warming on the severity of storms. The well known dangers are compounded by the low elevation of the towns and cities situated alongside coastal waters on land that was recovered through the draining of swamps.

Francine and her husband have lived in their condo community in South Fort Myers since 2013, having moved from Pennsylvania.

Barry Grey: Can you tell us about your background?

Francine: I grew up in a blue collar neighborhood about 25 miles outside of Philadelphia. We lived on the end of a row of houses in a home that originally belonged to my father and mother. My grandfather bought the house for them for \$2,400.

My dad was a mill worker and my mother was a stay-at-home mother. My father was a union organizer, but he ended up being the superintendent of a non-union, family-owned paper mill.

BG: What is the situation today in Lee County, 10 days after Ian made landfall?

Francine: We can only go as far as the bridge leading into Fort Myers Beach. It's closed off to the public, but you can see the devastation. At the bottom of the bridge, before you go over, there are a lot of restaurants, there was a little trailer park—it's nothing but sticks and boats, cars and trucks that are totally destroyed.

I would like to talk about Sanibel Island as well, but we can't get over there to see it. We can only see it on television and it's horrific.

Our development is a condominium development. These are like concrete bunkers. We're just lucky. My neighbor tells me that our little

village where we live is about nine feet higher elevation from everything around us, and that's the reason we were almost unscathed.

Half a mile down the street from us there is a community of primarily blacks and Hispanics—a lot of the homes were built by Habitat for Humanity—and they're wiped out. Just half a mile away. Those are all separate private homes.

We rode by some of the trailer parks, and many of them, the prefabricated homes, are gone. There's nothing but sticks standing there, or if the shell remains, you can see right through it.

Somebody told me that a man living in a trailer park—and I believe this—an old man in Lee County come out and looked at his trailer park home and shot himself when he saw the damage. He had survived the storm, but he could not live with the devastation.

On Pine Island, which is a tiny island, people were interviewed and said if they had left the island, they knew that nobody was going to take care of them. And now Pine Island is just a pile of rubble and debris. It hit very hard for those people, and they had been struggling anyway well before Ian hit.

The rents are soaring. One woman said one night on the news that her rent went from \$739 a month to over \$1,000. She said, “I'm homeless. I can't afford it.”

I could bet you everything I have that they don't have insurance, and if they do, people are waiting to get through to FEMA three hours on the phone and then they still can't get through.

As for the death count, I can't imagine with that storm surge that it's only 130 or so. And it's hard to get that information. You would think you would be hearing it on the news every night, but you don't.

BG: Do people have shelter, water, food, medicine? Do people have power?

Francine: In general, I think there are less than 100,000 people without power. Power is the best thing. Even in Cape Coral, where my daughter lives and where it was hit horribly, they got their power at 5 o'clock last night.

The water is an entirely different situation. We have to boil our water and we'll probably have to do that for quite a while.

I think in terms of shelter, the primary shelter is being provided by friends and relatives. We have two or three neighbors who have people living with them who are homeless. The shelters are not good places to be. I have a neighbor who went to a shelter during Hurricane Irma, and I asked him, “Jerry, are you going to go to a shelter?” And he said, “I would rather die.”

The woman who lives above me on the second floor has a woman living with her. She said her home is completely gone.

I don't think there is any plan for emergency housing. Food is a different story. The National Guard had food stations within 24 hours.

There were places where people could go get little prepared meals. The water supply was very limited, you could get a case of water and they limited ice to two bags of ice.

Medicine is another story, because a lot of people here, elderly people, don't take their full medical prescriptions simply because they can't afford them. So I know they're not getting what they need.

BG: Are residents being kept informed?

Francine: No. What you get on the news is a lot of pictures, a lot of reporters standing out there in water showing you how this neighborhood is gone, that neighborhood is gone. But in terms of information, no.

I can't tell you, and I live here, what the current death count is. I can't tell you how many people are still stranded on Sanibel. I'm sure they don't have precise numbers, but they've got to have something.

People can't get help. A woman said on a local news channel that she waited three hours on the phone to get through to FEMA and she still has no answer. There are people who clearly will be homeless. There's going to be a huge homeless population here.

BG: Besides the National Guard and FEMA, what about local agencies?

Francine: Our local services are doing what they can with what they have. The real help is coming from neighbors helping neighbors. I went to a boutique where I shop and they had sent out a notice and said here are the kinds of things people need. We're collecting them and taking them down to Harlem Heights. I filled up my trunk and my back seat and when I went to that shop, you couldn't get in the door, there was so much there.

It wasn't used things. People had gone out and bought the things they requested on the list they sent out to their customers. I think more of that is going on than we'll ever know.

BG: Do you think the government made adequate advance preparations for such a storm? Were clear evacuation plans distributed to residents?

Francine: To my knowledge, Lee County, where we live, where Fort Myers Beach is, where Sanibel is, they had a meticulous evacuation strategy for something like Ian, they just didn't put it in place. They didn't act on it.

The authorities, the experts, the meteorologists were spreading the alarm and some of them were almost crying, and yet Lee County waited until 24 hours before the storm hit to issue evacuation orders.

Even though the meteorologists were tracking that thing for three days before it hit and knew how huge it was, there were no orders. And in terms of plans, the way you get a hurricane plan, you have to have a television. And you have to have a cell phone that you can hold up and get the url on your cell phone. How many of our residents, many of whom are really old, have that kind of technological savvy?

BG: Were provisions made to provide transportation?

Francine: No. They had a plan for it, but they didn't offer it.

BG: It's not exactly analogous, but given the location of Fort Myers and all of these massively built up communities, with a huge increase in population, given its low elevation and, of course, it's right on the Gulf, and the impact of global warming—it's almost like being on an ocean liner, where you have life boat drills.

Francine: You would think, to take that one step further, that everyone who lives here would know: Here are the 12 locations where there will be buses waiting to evacuate residents. Nothing like that.

BG: Because this type of storm, given these conditions, was inevitable.

Francine: It was a catastrophe waiting to happen here. We knew it.

BG: How would you describe the income level in this area?

Francine: The median household income in this county is probably—this year I looked it up—close to \$65,000. It isn't very high, but our neighborhood is much better off.

There are a lot of minimum wage workers here, mostly people of Spanish origin—Mexicans, people from the islands. The people who work on the roofs, for example, many of them can't speak English. They're probably better off than the restaurant workers, than the service people,

but even so, you just can't live on an \$11 an hour minimum wage.

Migrant workers being brought in to do cleanup and repair are desperate to get here, and it's unfortunate that they are being taken advantage of. Many of them hope maybe they can stay. I think it's reprehensible.

A neighbor called the other day to ask how we were and I said I want to make a sizable financial donation and I'm trying to figure out about where to make it to ensure that it goes directly to what is needed. People who are right up against it know what is needed. Maybe baby diapers, maybe personal hygiene products. And she said, "Oh, why don't you give it to the governor's relief fund?" And I thought to myself, "Are you nuts? That is the last place. I would not give him a red penny."

This area is right wing and Governor DeSantis is denying that they could have done a better job with the evacuation. You know what he is doing with the immigrants. He really is a fascist and I'm terrified because he has big political aspirations. He's a Trumpite, and here's the frightening thing—he's smarter. Of course, anybody's smarter than Donald Trump, but this guy is crafty.

BG: The big question is: Why? What were the underlying reasons no serious preparations were made, why insufficient resources were allocated?

Francine: The almost exclusive focus of the media on when they issued the evacuation order may be a useful diversion for the authorities. It has less to do with when they told people to evacuate and more to do with—even if they had issued the order two or three days earlier, how could they evacuate. I think that's the real issue.

People have been moving here in droves and our population has increased significantly. It went from 700,000 to a million just in this area over the past couple of years.

Lee County is the second-fastest growing county in Florida. Between 2020, when the pandemic shut things down, to July of 2021, 27,000 people moved to just our county alone. That means we were getting 1,800 new neighbors every month. That's a huge population growth.

Now there is a lot of defensiveness going on. Governor DeSantis has claimed, and I think it's a lie, that Lee County wasn't included in the national hurricane center's forecast track 72 hours before the storm hit, and instead it was predicted to strike Tampa. But guess what? That was a huge storm and Tampa is only about 100 miles north, so what would be wrong with erring on the side of caution?

BG: What determines the decisions of the authorities? In the US, over a million people have died needlessly in the coronavirus pandemic because the types of measures that would have stopped the spread of the virus and ultimately eliminated it cut across the interests of corporate profit, stock prices and the need to keep workers on the job producing profit, which was the main reason there was such a drive to reopen the schools.

Francine: Well, here in Florida we never closed, you know. Yep, I'm with you. I hear it.

BG: If you have a ruling class that is capable of allowing a million people to die in a pandemic, why wouldn't it be capable of allowing many people to die and be devastated in a storm rather than allocate the money needed to build the infrastructure and put in place the resources to protect the population?

Francine: You don't have to convince me of that at all. I believe that's exactly what is going on, and it's going on not just here in Florida, it is a nationwide problem, a horrible problem.

One of DeSantis' campaign ads has different people of all different colors saying: "Thank you, Governor DeSantis, for keeping us open. Thank you, Governor DeSantis, for preserving our freedom. Thank you, Governor DeSantis, for allowing me to go to work. Thank you, Governor DeSantis, for allowing me to worship with others."

And I'm thinking, are you nuts? All he was really doing was making sure the money machine continued. That's all that was. That has nothing to do with caring about you.

And then there's the billions they are spending on the war in Ukraine. There's never been popular support for a war since World War II.

With Ian, we suffered billions in damage. It might even be trillions. A major loss of homes and lives, and I don't know when we will get a handle on it.

One would think that everyone here knew exactly what was coming our way. And not only that, but where relief could be obtained and how soon, and what people could expect. But I don't think we have any idea what to expect and by when. It's going to be long time and there's nothing worse than not knowing.

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On October 19, Francine sent the following addendum:

Ian has proven my personal belief that natural disasters always magnify social disasters!

It has been 11 days since I reported the terror Ian unleashed on me and my fellow Lee County, Florida residents. From my perspective, evidence of at least two social disasters is painfully evident.

The first social disaster is the **lack of foresight and community planning**. The loss of life and property could have been mitigated (if not prevented) with more attention to building structurally safe and sound communities vs. the development of low-quality/high-profit (and often high-risk) communities. Ian exacerbates the social—the crime committed by Florida's civic leaders—of building for profit vs. sustainability.

Ian amplified a second social disaster—the **lack of transparency from our elected leaders**. We were told by officials that the late evacuation notice was due to a last minute shift in hurricane direction and that “most people wouldn't heed the evacuation notices.” The reality is that Ian was 140 miles wide and warranted much earlier and broader evacuation notices.

It is also difficult to get believable reporting of the loss of life. Newscasters report anywhere from 54 to 110 Ian-related deaths. This may be because even though there may have been local police reports of storm-related deaths, the Florida State Law Enforcement agency only reports deaths reported by the state medical examiner's commission after an autopsy. So, officials tell us, “People die in disasters that have nothing to do with the actual disaster.” In the meantime, the candidates for elected office and the media bombard us with political ads and other distractions to divert our quest for the straight story about loss of human life.

All of this said, it would be remiss of me not to mention that Ian has validated another of my beliefs, and that is that natural disasters unleash human resilience. I've been touched by the undaunted spirit of those most adversely affected by Ian and the heartfelt support and uncommon generosity of neighbor for neighbor, neighbors for strangers and for all who have suffered, including pets! Being witness to Ian was frightening. Being witness to the response of the good people affected has been reaffirming!



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