

Death toll climbs to 60 as impact of widespread US winter storm becomes clear

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27 December 2022

The massive storm and cold that is still sweeping most of the United States has exposed the inability of the capitalist system to deal with even basic social needs of the people, along with the devastating impact of capitalist-caused climate change.

As of Tuesday, nearly 60 people have been confirmed killed in the current storm, half of them in Buffalo, New York. This number is certain to rise as rescue crews reach cars buried in the snow and homes that have been without power for days in sub-freezing temperatures.

Politicians, like Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown, New York Governor Kathy Hochul and President Joe Biden, all Democrats, have pledged that they are doing everything they can and offered their prayers to the families and friends of those who have died. On Monday, President Biden signed an emergency declaration for Western New York even as he prepared to leave for a vacation in the US Virgin Islands with First Lady Jill Biden.

On Sunday, Governor Hochul described the storm as the “most devastating storm in Buffalo’s long storied history.” The news media have dubbed it the “storm of the century,” implying that it was impossible to prepare for and so severe as to make a significant death toll unavoidable.

Nothing is further from the truth. Buffalo is routinely hit with large quantities of snow, and climate scientists have warned that global warming will fuel more such storms both in frequency, intensity and duration. Just as with the COVID-19 pandemic, in which a quarter million deaths per year from a preventable disease have been presented as inevitable, the population is told to accept that it must go without basic services, properly maintained roads, power and other infrastructure needed to sustain life any time the wind blows or rain falls.

While the Biden administration is boasting that it just passed a record military budget of \$857.9 billion, it has been cutting social programs for the working class and poor. Between expenditures last year and those allocated in the new military budget, the Biden administration will spend nearly \$100 billion fighting the NATO proxy war in Ukraine

against Russia.

Meanwhile, the elimination of the extended child tax credit has pushed millions of families into poverty. The lifting of a moratorium on evictions has driven up homelessness, and funding to fight the pandemic has been cut.

The official death toll in Buffalo stands at 28 and social media are filled with pleas for help along with videos of people trapped in cars and homes.

Anndel Taylor, 22, was driving home from work on Friday when her car got stuck in the snow. She called 911 for help but was repeatedly put on hold. She was able to send text and video to her family showing snow piling up around her car. By midnight, still trapped in her car, she told family that she was going to try and get some sleep and then walk home. That was the last they heard from her. First responders were not able to reach her for another 18 hours, after she had already died.

Others have been found dead in their homes or cars. Several people died while walking or shoveling snow.

On Monday, both Buffalo Mayor Brown and Governor Hochul stressed that people had been warned not to travel during the storm, implying that the fault lay with them. However, businesses were not ordered to close before the storm hit and many people were trapped coming home from work, one of whom was Anndel Taylor.

Furthermore, while the storm was predicted a week in advance and could be watched developing for several days, as frigid temperatures moved from northwest to the south and east, officials took no action to ensure that roads would be plowed or emergency shelters set up for the homeless and those who lost power.

On Friday, Buffalo temperatures quickly dropped into the sub-freezing and single digit range. Along with the rapid drop in temperatures, hurricane force winds reaching 79 MPH created whiteout conditions, reducing visibility to near-zero.

On Monday, temperatures had only climbed into the teens and they are not expected to go above freezing until Wednesday or Thursday.

Buffalo's Department of Public Works, Parks and Streets, responsible for, among other things, picking up trash and clearing the streets of snow, is budgeted for just 24 truck drivers and 43 equipment operators, who may or may not be able to assist with snow removal. The overtime budget is just \$675,000, half of what the city spent the previous year. Generally, the city has relied on contractors to do the plowing. Buffalo spent over \$1.2 million on contractors to clear snow in the massive lake effect storm last month.

City officials have yet to give a clear report on when plows were mobilized, although anecdotal accounts show that only token, if any, plowing was done as the storm began. By Saturday, all of Buffalo's fire trucks had become stuck. On Sunday, according to local news, the city had only one 24-hour warming center open and two others open for half-days. Considering that people were unable to travel even a few blocks, let alone halfway across the city, this was ineffectual.

Buffalo, like most American cities, does not operate any homeless shelters. Instead, they are run by religious and other charitable organizations. Under capitalism, health care, providing for the homeless, and ending hunger and poverty are not considered a social responsibility.

State officials declared a state of emergency, but effective help only began to arrive on Tuesday. It is likely that the delay in the response was the result of a combination of sheer indifference to the plight of working people and the poor, and a cold calculation to avoid the cost of overtime to employ city drivers and contractors to begin clearing the streets as the storm began to hit on Christmas Eve.

As of Tuesday morning, city officials reported that over 13 percent of residents were still without power. Residents are reporting that they have run out of food. With unplowed roads, many are unable to get to stores, and where they can, they are finding that many are closed.

While Buffalo is seeing the worst of the deaths, the storm has had a devastating impact throughout the country.

Jackson, Mississippi is under a boil water advisory. Frozen and burst pipes have caused water pressure to fall so low that many residents cannot get water. The water authority does not even know the extent of the problem and has appealed to residents to report leaks.

Police in Colorado Springs, Colorado report that two homeless men died in the cold, one who froze in his tent and another whose body was found near an electric transformer, possibly looking for warmth.

Motor vehicle deaths in Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Ohio, Tennessee and Wisconsin have been blamed on the storm.

Scores of others will be reported as fire or carbon monoxide deaths, as many people are forced to use

generators and dangerous space heaters to stay warm.

The intensity and frequency of severe cold and snow storms are understood as products of global warming.

As the planet has warmed, the Arctic region has warmed faster than the equator. It is the temperature difference between the Arctic and the equator, which powers an atmospheric jet stream running west to east, that generally helps to keep cold air trapped over the North Pole. It is the weakening of this jet stream that has allowed cold air to move from the Arctic across Canada deep into the southern United States.

Furthermore, the warming of the waters in the Great Lakes reduces ice cover, which, along with a generally warmer atmosphere, allows more moisture to be absorbed and then dumped in larger amounts as lake-effect snow.

Forecasters are predicting temperatures to rise throughout the week, although this is taking longer than previously thought.

But even as those in the East may see an end to single-digit and sub-freezing temperatures, a new cold front and storm system has already begun moving into the Northwest, causing power outages in Oregon and Washington state.

Capitalism, a system based on generating profits for the rich, has once again proven incapable of meeting the needs of the vast majority. No matter if it is global warming, the pandemic, the threat of nuclear war, or health care, housing, food and education, for the majority of people, capitalism has no solution. Only when the working class takes control of production and society is run democratically for the needs of all and not the profits of a tiny few can these great social problems be addressed.



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