

Mississippi River flooding exposes deep problems with US infrastructure

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This week, the Mississippi River crested in the upper Midwest states of Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin after days of rapid overflow and flooding from the end of April to the first week of May. Although the floods did not top the record-setting disaster of 2019, which saw water levels peak at 98.2 feet, millions of residents were affected and nearly completely devastated. The threat is not over, with meteorologists predicting major floods in the region through mid-May.

Most areas saw peaks in the top five flood levels for the area, and the peak of the river crest hit 22.8 feet, less than three feet below the record. Around Dubuque, Iowa, the river reached one of its top three flood levels ever recorded since the nineteenth century.

Floodwaters spilled into basements and submerged backyards in Iowa before the flooding peaked. On April 27, the National Weather Service issues 58 flood warnings across Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, and Wisconsin. But many residents had to deal with problems before that, and with some who have lived along the riverfront for years, the floods have become a chaotic and more regular feature of life as flood planning still remains disorganized and decentralized after decades of near-record and record crests amid the growing impact of the man-made climate change.

Residents who lived along the riverfront and whose homes were not protected from the flooding were evacuating as early as the beginning of April in Davenport, Iowa. To mitigate damage to property, many Iowans and others along the flooded riverfront have been left on their own to place sandbags around their homes or find shelter elsewhere.

Janine Buckley, a Buffalo, Iowa, resident described the threat she and many working class people in the area faced to AccuWeather News: “We’re on our own little island, but it’s not fun. First, it was a little scary. Now, I’m just ready for it to be over...The biggest challenge is

just getting out to the car and getting groceries.”

Iowa Republican Governor Kim Reynolds issued a disaster proclamation for Allamakee, Clayton, Clinton, Des Moines, Dubuque, Jackson, Lee, Louisa, Muscatine and Scott counties in late April, which allows state resources to be utilized for response and recovery from flood impacts. Another proclamation issued activated the Iowa Individual Assistance Grant Program and the Disaster Case Management Program for Clayton, Clinton, Dubuque, Jackson and Scott counties. These measures amount to too little, too late.

One of the main reasons that the flood did not surpass record levels was last year’s drought in Iowa, which nearly set a record and scorched crops in the state whose economy is heavily dependent on industrialized production of corn and soy. The dryer grounds soaked up much of the moisture caused by the record snow melt, highlighting the extent of the overall infrastructure crisis and how much more devastating it could have been.

The immediate cause of the flooding was the annual snow melt at the Mississippi River’s upper basin, which causes it to rise each year as air temperature warms. But this year, Minnesota and Wisconsin experienced record-setting snowfalls. The snow on the ground was especially heavy and wet, combined with a rash of unusually warm days in April that led to a faster and more intense melt than the affected areas were prepared to handle. Parts of the upper Mississippi also recorded up to four inches above average rainfall this season, exacerbating the overflow.

The more general causes of the devastating Mississippi River floods in the US Midwest over the past several decades—the record-breaking flood in 1993, and floods in 2011, 2019 and now 2023—include climate change. According to the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association, “the Earth’s temperature has risen by an average of 0.14° Fahrenheit (0.08° Celsius) per decade

since 1880, or about 2° F in total. The rate of warming since 1981 is more than twice as fast: 0.32° F (0.18° C) per decade.”

The US Environmental Protection Agency has long made the connection between rising global temperatures and the way in which these conditions increase the intensity and frequency of floods. It states, “As warmer temperatures cause more water to evaporate from the land and oceans, changes in the size and frequency of heavy precipitation events may in turn affect the size and frequency of river flooding.”

Another important factor behind the cause of major flooding is human activity, including a lack of centralized planning and organization to mitigate damage from floods and for resident safety. The city of Davenport only has temporary flood barriers and does not have a permanent flood wall or levee system, unlike the neighboring cities of Bettendorf and Rock Island, despite having nine miles of riverfront prone to flooding.

Davenport Mayor Mike Matson summed up the attitude of the ruling class in the area, stating to the *Quad City Times*, “It isn’t a cost-effective solution now ... Where would you like us to get this money?” Davenport’s website states that it received about \$41 million in federal COVID-19 relief funding through the American Rescue Plan Act in 2021, which was stated to be used “to improve quality of life for Davenport residents, to provide for immediate recovery needs, and to create a long-term investment for Davenport’s future.”

Even with the disastrous impact of the 2019 floods fresh in the memories of residents, little to none of this money appears to have been devoted to protecting them from environmental disasters. According to the *Quad City Times*, a survey conducted by the city showed that a majority of residents desire a permanent solution to the more frequent flooding along the Mississippi.

The refusal to provide flood protection for Davenport’s mainly working class residents is part of a decades-long process of deliberate assault on social programs and infrastructure by the US ruling class. In Davenport alone, the US Army Corps of Engineers first proposed a flood control plan in 1969 after the devastating 1965 flood. The plan was reported to cost \$16.5 million, with the city’s share at \$3 million, according to the *Quad City Times* archives, but it was not implemented.

The city decided against subsequent proposals in the following decade. In 1984, a proposal was made to build a \$34-million floodwall between the Government Bridge and Interstate 280 with the support of the Army Corps of

Engineers. The permanent floodwall would have protected the city from floods up to 26.9 feet, higher than the recent crest, but it was withdrawn from the City Council and never funded.

For decades, Democratic and Republican lawmakers alike have given tax breaks to major corporations and stripped away regulations and social infrastructure spending to satisfy the private profit needs of corporate management and financiers, all at the expense of the working class. This has not only resulted in environmental damage produced by carbon emissions and rapacious business practices which have led to the rise in global temperature, but lifted any responsibility from the ruling class to take adequate measures to protect the population from natural disasters.

According to the 2021 Infrastructure Report Card issued by the American Society of Civil Engineers, US infrastructure for levees and stormwater management received a “D” grade, the second-lowest possible, which indicates “poor, at risk.” Drinking water, wastewater and stormwater needs for the US as a whole require over \$1 trillion, and levees alone require \$80 billion.

Appealing to the capitalist class and its politicians for funding for critical infrastructure to prevent devastation from floods and their root causes is not the solution for the working class, forced to bear the brunt of record floods around the world, from Asia to Germany to the US. The cause is the global capitalist system, that places the lives and needs of the working class and the planet at risk in order to secure ever greater profits and pile up personal wealth for a relative handful of the super-rich.

The working class must have an understanding of the political and economic roots of the environmental catastrophes they face, and place them in a global context. An organized fight to place the working class in control of the wealth of society, in a revolutionary struggle for socialism, organized and led by the international working class against the capitalist class on a global scale, is the only way to prevent and reverse the devastating impacts of floods and other natural disasters that are the result of the profit system.



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