

Hundreds of heat deaths across US Southwest and Mexico: A capitalist crime

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The global heatwave continues, with its devastating death toll extending over the affected areas. At least 249 people have lost their lives in Mexico since March due to extreme heat, with the vast majority attributable to heat stroke. The rest died from dehydration. In the last month 12 states reported blackouts.

This came as a result of record temperatures, with some Mexican states topping 113 degrees Fahrenheit (45 degrees Celsius).

The heatwave is a result of the inability of the ruling elite to address capitalist-caused climate change, with the record-shattering heat signaling a tipping point entailing an acceleration in the number of climate-change-caused disasters. The worst effects of this are being borne by the working class, poor and elderly.

In Arizona, doctors are treating burn victims who suffered their injuries from falling down on the ground. The director of the Arizona Burn Center at Valleywise Health, Dr Kevin Foster, reported that every single one of the 45 beds in the burn center is full, with a third of these patients being people who fell and burned themselves on the ground.

“The temperature of asphalt and pavement and concrete and sidewalks in Arizona on a warm sunny day or summer afternoon is 180 degrees sometimes. I mean, it’s just a little below boiling, so it’s really something,” Foster told CNN.

Asphalt in particular due to its darker color has a lower albedo (or solar reflectance), reflecting less light compared to concrete, thereby heating up faster and reaching higher peak temperatures in similar conditions.

Not having air conditioning in Arizona is deadly, with outdoor temperatures topping 110 F (43 degrees C). Even the military, which is not known for its humane treatment of its personnel, suspends all PT and

training activities at a heat index of 90 degrees and above, sometimes even excluding non-training missions.

Arizona has seen residents perish in the scorching heat before, with 72-year-old Stephanie Pullman dying after her electricity was cut off because of a \$51 debt in 2018, in an especially egregious case of social murder. The public outcry following Pullman’s death forced some minor changes in shut-off rules in the largest regulated utilities in Arizona, but residents continue to die from electricity shutoffs.

This issue extends beyond Arizona, with 180 million people under a heat advisory on Friday across the US, and millions at risk of electricity cut-offs. According to Sanya Carley, a professor of energy policy and city planning at the University of Pennsylvania, one-quarter of US households are uncertain of their ability to pay for their energy bills. Carley noted that three million households suffered cutoffs last year. CBS News reports that only 19 states restrict summer shutoffs of utilities.

In Maricopa County, Arizona, home to Phoenix, the most populous city in the state, 18 heat-associated deaths were confirmed as of July 15, going back to April 11. A further 69 deaths are under investigation. Four of these occurred inside, with three from non-functioning air conditioners and another from electricity that was not turned on. The city has added refrigerated containers to store bodies, anticipating a surge of heat-related deaths. Ten 8-by-20 foot coolers were recently delivered to a lot near the office of the county medical examiner’s office.

For 2022, according to Maricopa County’s 2022 Heat Deaths Report, 425 heat-associated deaths were recorded. These deaths have been on the rise since

2014, and in recent years have outpaced population growth. Between 2021 and 2022, heat deaths increased 25 percent while population grew by a mere 1.3 percent, meaning that 23.7 percent of that increase is connected to factors other than population growth.

The largest share of those deaths were among the homeless, with 178 deaths reported. Four-fifths of these deaths were men, three-fifths were “non-Hispanic white,” while two-thirds were among those aged 50 or older. Two-thirds had no post-secondary school education. Eighty-six people died indoors in 2022, with a somewhat greater number of these deaths among men (58 percent). All indoor deaths lacked air-conditioning.

In so many words, the deaths were among the elderly and the poor. It is a class issue, not an issue of race or gender.

Much as with the COVID-19 pandemic, the capitalist elite apply the Nazi concept of lebensunwertes Leben “life unworthy of life” to the elderly, the sick, and poor workers.

This year’s heatwave deaths follow a global trend of such events. Last summer, nearly 62,000 died in Europe from then-record-breaking heat according to a recent study published in *Nature*. Italy led the death toll at 18,000, followed by Spain at 11,000 and Germany at 8,000.

In Texas, Republican governor Gregg Abbott has used the heatwave as an opportunity to deliver a provocative and essentially fascist order banning local ordinances that require water-breaks for workers. In response to this, the Democrats performed their usual hand-wringing, with Democratic Socialists of America member and US House Democrat Greg Cesar holding a performative 9-hour “thirst strike.”

Texas has seen massive death tolls from heat, with at least 306 people dying of heat-related causes last year, smashing previous records going back 20 years. This death toll was roughly split between residents and migrants.

Amid the heatwave, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) has called for the continuation of a moratorium on energy cutoffs in Texas until September 15. The AARP cited the US Census Bureau, which reported that over 44 percent of Texans face energy insecurity, reducing payments for necessities such as food, medicine and rent in order to pay their energy bill.

The Public Utility Commission of Texas (PUCT) claimed it extended the moratorium, but used the specious requirements of these moratorium days having to coincide with the “National Weather Service issu[ing] a heat advisory for a county, or when an advisory has been issued for the two preceding days,” instead of extending it to a specific date.

According to the *New York Times*, “Workers make up a large share of hospital admissions for heat-related” illnesses, but in Laredo, where ten people died between June 15 and July 3, the deaths were mostly among the elderly.

Intersecting with the barbarous policy towards immigrants of both the Texas government as well as the Biden administration, this year 103 migrants died from heat near the US-Mexico border. Desperate to escape the heat, hundreds of migrants who have made the arduous journey to the border have in desperation resorted to alerting Customs and Border Protection (CBP) via CBP-placed beacons, in order to be detained and thus escape the deadly heat. Chief Jason Owens of CBP stated on his Twitter page on July 20 that in the span of just 72 hours 71 migrants were rescued by CBP.

Further endangering migrants, the governor has installed a floating razor wire lined wall along the Rio Grande river, posing the dual risk of extending migrants’ travels in the desert, increasing the risk of death from heat-stroke or dehydration, or by drowning should they attempt to bypass the floating wall via the river.

This is part of Abbott’s attempt to outdo the Biden administration, attacking immigrants as part of his illegal “Operation Lone Star” border security initiative. An email from a Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) Trooper revealed that officers working under the initiative have been instructed to push immigrant children back into the Rio Grande and to withhold water from asylum seekers, likely contributing to the death toll along the border.



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