

Tropical Storm Hilary continues north after devastating California's southeastern desert region with flash flooding, trapping people in their homes and cars

Norisa Diaz
21 August 2023

On Monday Tropical Storm Hilary was downgraded to a post-tropical cyclone as it continued north through the Western United States, continuing to bring what the National Hurricane Center warned was severe “life-threatening and locally catastrophic” flooding to the states of California, Arizona and Nevada. Prior to hitting California, the storm barreled through Baja California, Mexico, where it made landfall as a hurricane, killing at least one man in Santa Rosalía whose car was swept off the road.

Amid record-breaking global air and ocean temperatures fueled by capitalism-driven climate change, the rare tropical storm has dumped vast amounts of rain on Southern California and western Nevada.

While at the time of this writing no lives have been reported lost, numerous life-threatening events transpired overnight, including the falling of trees onto homes, car-sized boulders being washed onto roads, residents being trapped in numerous flooded areas, the destruction of roads and infrastructure, and powerful mudslides carrying tons of rocks, dirt and debris.

Significantly the storm took out the 911 emergency system in numerous Southwest desert regions throughout California, including Palm Springs, Indio and Cathedral City, where many were trapped in their flooded homes. Some families with children and infants were forced onto their roofs, while many including elderly were still waiting to be rescued Monday.

Throughout Monday rescue teams continued using bulldozers to rescue families in Cathedral City. Residents also reported the horror of listening to people

yell for help for hours, including a woman trapped near her car in a flooded street.

Adding to the devastation, numerous residents reported having no idea how they were going to afford recovering from the damages, with one remarking to Reuters, “Who has flood insurance in a desert?”

Dozens of cars succumbed to the flood waters and still remain trapped, particularly in California's Southeastern desert regions with rain totals expected to reach up to 12 inches in some areas, according to the National Weather Service.

The storm has exceeded more than half the average annual rain on many desert and mountain areas, including Palm Springs, that experienced nearly 3 inches of rain by Sunday night. Beverly Hills recorded 4.8 inches, and downtown Los Angeles recorded nearly 3 inches. The National Weather Service's Los Angeles office reported that as of 3:00 a.m. Monday virtually all rainfall daily records for the area had been broken.

As of Monday morning in Los Angeles County, the most populous in the nation, some 31,000 people lost power, while another 7,000 in the Coachella Valley and Imperial County regions also lost electricity due to downed power lines.

The National Weather Service also warned that Ventura County residents continue to face dangerous flooding, and the San Bernardino, Riverside and nearby mountains were also at high risk of flash floods. Evacuation orders were issued for San Bernardino and Riverside counties.

Meanwhile 1 to 5 inches of rain are expected across Oregon and Idaho through Tuesday morning, bringing

more flash flooding.

Officials in Nevada continue to warn about dangerous flooding throughout the western Mojave Desert as flood watches remain in effect throughout Southern California and parts of Arizona, Nevada, southwest Utah, eastern Oregon, western and central Idaho and southeast Washington. Currently in Mt. Charleston and the Rainbow Canyon region in Clark County, Nevada, residents are sheltering in place without power, and numerous roads have been completely closed off.

Numerous school districts throughout Southern California and Nevada canceled school for Monday, including Los Angeles Unified, San Diego Unified and Nye County in Nevada. However, school remained open at other major districts, including Sweetwater Union High School District (SUHSD) in San Diego County along the border with Tijuana.

The refusal to close the district sparked anger from educators and parents, many of whom kept their children home from school. SUHSD doubled down on its refusal to close schools as the threat of the storm remained unclear on Sunday morning.

Reiterating its refusal to close the major district to ensure parents show up for work, the office of Superintendent Moisés Aguirre sent a letter to the parents and staff noting, “Our families rely heavily on our schools to provide a safe place for students during the workday, therefore we are committed to staying open as long as conditions allow.”

While the widespread sentiment is a sigh of relief that the storm had been downgraded to a tropical storm and had wrought less havoc than anticipated in San Diego County, the refusal of the entire SUHSD school board to assume the precautionary principle is being met with outrage. An educator with SUHSD told the WSWs that some 10-15 percent of families kept their kids out of school Monday. “Some students had only subs today, and educators were forced to watch class periods during their prep times.” Many parents expressed concern for families impacted in Tijuana who cross on a daily basis for work and school.

The full extent of damage in Baja California and the major city of Tijuana, just south of the San Diego, California, border has yet to be fully exposed but crumbling infrastructure has long posed major threats to residents of the city, known for having overcrowded and poorly built dwellings packed along hills, as well

as extensive dirt and poorly paved roads.

Recent heavy rains from March and April of this year collapsed two cliffside buildings and threatened roadways for travelers on the highway to Playas de Tijuana, forcing the Tijuana city council to declare an emergency situation.

The tragic Maui wildfires that leveled the town of Lahaina and killed still unknown hundreds, as well as the wildfires ripping through Canada weighed heavily on the minds of millions throughout the region impacted by Hilary, the vast majority of whom took precautions to prepare for the worst possible outcome. However, numerous employers throughout the region still expected workers to show up for work on Monday. This includes workers at United Parcel Service (UPS), the United States Postal Service (USPS), Pacific Maritime Association (PMA), and educators at school districts such as Sweetwater, to name just a few.

A postal worker in San Diego told the WSWs that USPS (United States Postal Service) had carriers working regular shifts Monday but felt that they should not have. “I doubt they’ll tell us to stay home—it’s in our contract—‘come rain, hail, sleet, snow.’ They made us work all throughout the pandemic even while we all got sick.”

The experience with Hilary is yet another expression of the hostile relationship employers have towards insisting workers show up to keep profits flowing. Moreover, the silence from the various trade unions is also palpable—from Teamsters to the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, to the American Postal Workers Union to the San Diego Education Association, none of the union bureaucracies made one peep that their members should refuse to show up, should the storm pose a hazardous risk.

As was true in March 2020 with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it will only be the insistence of the educators, parents and workers to close schools and shut down all non-essential industry to keep workers and students safe.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact