

“Our neighborhoods remain a dangerous mess”: Acapulco hotel worker speaks out two weeks after Hurricane Otis

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Two weeks after Hurricane Otis struck the coastal city of Acapulco, the plight of workers continues unabated, with many of the city’s working class districts still deprived of essentials like food, water and electricity.

The devastation and destruction caused by the hurricane as it tore through the impoverished and starkly unequal city in the early hours of October 25, plunged its residents into deeper hardship. Local authorities have reported 48 dead and 31 missing, along with many more sailors and tour boat workers missing.

The strongest hurricane on record to strike the west coast of Mexico, Otis registered a 205 mph wind gust, which, if verified, would be among the strongest ever measured globally. This took place after months of record surface ocean temperatures, with top atmospheric scientists declaring that global warming likely supercharged Otis.

The WSWS spoke with Lulu, a hotel worker in Punta Diamante where she also works a second job as a domestic worker, looking after one of the luxurious apartments that speckle this exclusive and segregated area of Acapulco where the Mexican elites spend their weekend getaways. She described her experience that night:

“I started receiving messages around 8 p.m., telling us to take shelter because it was getting serious. But by the time I finished work at 10:30 p.m. and saw the messages, it was too late. The hurricane was already a Category 4, heading for 5. I got home by 11 p.m., amidst flying tin sheet roofing and falling trees. There was no [mobile phone] signal, no light, everything had fallen apart.”

She continued, “Chaos erupted throughout the city. All the hotels were destroyed, furniture flung out of windows. It wasn’t just in Punta Diamante, but throughout the entire port. This is the first time we experienced something like this. Not even my father, with all his years, had seen anything like this.”

The explanation given by Mexico’s president, Andres Manuel López Obrador, known as AMLO, for the lack of any advance warning to the population of Acapulco is that the rapid acceleration of the hurricane was unprecedented. This is true to a degree. Two days before landfall, meteorologists doubted

whether Otis—then a tropical storm—would even achieve hurricane status. Otis strengthened into a Category 5 hurricane within the 24 hours before it struck the coast.

This does not explain, however, why the local government wasn’t mobilized once the strength of the hurricane had been confirmed by both Mexican and US meteorological centers. At 2:56 p.m. local time, eight hours before landfall, the National Hurricane Center issued a warning, “Otis Rapidly Strengthens Into a Major Hurricane. Now Expected to Be At Category 4 Intensity At Landfall.”

Lacking any governmental guidance, the population faced the onslaught without any preparation. Asked about the inadequate government response, Lulu said, “We didn’t hear it was a Category 5 hurricane until around 10 p.m. What difference did it make between 10 and 11 p.m. when it hit full force? There was no time for anything ... the earlier alerts were the usual—‘take shelter, take care’—which one hardly takes into account anymore because it’s always the same.”

In the absence of an organized evacuation plan, individual workplaces had to improvise solutions. Lulu described the situation faced by her son. “My son, who works at a hotel, experienced a similar situation. He was riding the hotel transportation, but after leaving the hotel roads were being shut down, so they had to take refuge at the basement of another hotel.”

She recounted her own experience during that night. “By the time I got home, tin sheets were flying all over. One of my roof sheets was gone and water was pouring in, like a waterfall. Most of our belongings in that room were gone. We tried to move what we could salvage, mostly clothing, into another room. A window had been torn open and it was impossible to get anywhere near it. It was horrible, truly horrible, this experience, me and my children huddled in a corner.”

Speaking about the impact on housing in her neighborhood, she explained, “We were lucky, our house wasn’t blown away since it’s constructed [with concrete columns], although we ended up losing all of our roofing [made of corrugated roofing sheets]. In the hillside where we live, the only houses left were the ones with this type of construction. The rest are all gone,

you can see big holes where there used to be [makeshift] wooden houses, they are all gone.”

The state of Guerrero is the second poorest state in Mexico. Sixty percent of the population lives in poverty and 25 percent in extreme poverty. The economic center of this impoverished state was the city of Acapulco, whose main source of income is tourism. Acapulco ranks as the city with the largest number of people living in extreme poverty, about 170,000 or 20 percent of the population.

Describing the immediate aftermath, Lulu said, “We are missing supplies, we are missing doctors. Medicines have always been scarce, but now even more so. And in the hospitals, there’s no light, no electricity, and they are not functioning normally. They’re only receiving patients in emergencies.”

The extreme inequality in Acapulco is also evident in the initial recovery efforts. According to Lulu, “There are now many neighborhoods with electricity, but it’s mostly in affluent neighborhoods, where the posts weren’t toppled by the storm. The government said that the priority is the tourist zone. But I say, why are they worried about bringing electricity to the tourist zone if it’s completely destroyed? Yes, it may have been our income source, but it no longer exists.”

Describing the economic impact, she added, “I looked after an apartment, but the owner is coming on Monday to close it down. ... He told me bluntly, ‘I am closing it down.’ So, he’s not going to fix it. He’s just shutting it down. The apartment is totaled.”

She continued, “The hotel where I worked is closed too; they owe me a fortnight’s pay which was not deposited. If you don’t go to work, what are they going to pay you for? So now I’m out of work.”

When asked about the current situation, she explained, “We live on a hillside, and everyday me and my son have to get around by walking. We don’t have any money to pay for a car. [Taxis] are currently charging more than double the usual fare. I’d rather save that money to buy water, although they are now charging triple for water. It’s very hard to get by.”

Asked about the supplies that are being handed by the government, she said, “[The Army] set themselves up about a mile from where we live. There you have to stand in a long line under the sun; the wait can be very long. Sometimes they don’t even show up. I don’t understand why with those big trucks they have, they don’t get closer to where we live. Instead, we need to walk down the hillside, wait in line and then walk back up to our homes, carrying the water jugs and the food provisions.”

She added, “We are beaten, very tired. Walking up those long distances carrying a [five gallon] water bottle is extremely tiring. This is the case with 80 or 90 percent of the population here in Acapulco. Older people don’t even attempt to walk down to the supply centers. They just can’t do it.”

Elaborating on the plight of workers who lost their houses,

she continued, “I can’t imagine how people who live higher uphill and who lost their homes are dealing with this. It’s been raining during the night. It gets dark after six. If you’re walking outside at night there’s a big risk of hurting yourself with all the sheet metal and cables lying around. The priority [of the cleanup effort] has been on cleaning the main thoroughfares, which I understand. But our neighborhoods remain a dangerous mess.”

Asked whether there was any free public transit in the city, she remarked, “For a while there was free transport to leave Acapulco. But that is no longer being offered. And even then, to get back to the city you had to pay. When I went to Chilpancingo [the capital city of Guerrero state] to buy cell phone service I was able to get there for free, but on the way back I had to pay. “

Discussing the rumors surrounding the distribution of supplies, she said, “There is a lot of misinformation. They said that the supplies that were sent on the first day were stolen. They weren’t stolen. People are desperate, and as soon as the supplies arrived they were immediately taken by the people in need. The issue has been a lack of organization by the local government.”

Regarding the origin of these supplies, she commented, “The [supply] boxes I’ve seen seem to be civilian donations from other states. None of the boxes carry the seal of SEGOB [Department of the Interior]. Instead they say ‘Donation from the population.’” Collection centers from various governmental agencies and NGOs have sprung up throughout the country, where people have been donating food, clothing and medicine.

Lulu’s testimony reflects the plight of countless others workers in Acapulco, left to fend for themselves amidst a natural disaster compounded by systemic neglect and a glaring lack of adequate government intervention.



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