

Acapulco two months after Hurricane Otis: An indictment of capitalist response to climate crisis

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Two months have passed since Hurricane Otis ravaged the port of Acapulco, the capital city of Guerrero state in southwestern Mexico, in the early hours of October 25.

In a 12-hour span before landfall, Otis developed from a tropical storm into a cataclysmic Category 5 hurricane sustaining 165 mph winds. According to the US National Hurricane Center, Otis “was the strongest hurricane in the Eastern Pacific to make landfall in the satellite era.”

Official figures put the death toll at 52, a likely undercount. Thirty-two people are still missing. Approximately 274,000 homes were damaged or destroyed, impacting 580,000 people, about two thirds of the population. The hurricane ravaged more than 17,000 acres and flooded 2,000 acres, causing an estimated \$15 billion in damages.

The state of Guerrero ranks as the second poorest state in Mexico, with 64 percent of the population (2.3 million people) living in poverty, and 25 percent (900,000 people) in extreme poverty. Acapulco is the Mexican city with the highest number of people (126,000) living in extreme poverty. It is a city of extreme inequality, where the Mexican elites own luxurious apartments for their weekend getaways, while the workers that keep the city running live in impoverished, marginal zones.

Otis has shone a spotlight on this inequality. In the weeks after the disaster, while tourists and apartment owners abandoned the port city, the residents of Acapulco had no choice but to suffer through the storm’s aftermath. With the city’s infrastructure crippled, over a million people had to endure prolonged outages of electricity, water, food supplies, gasoline

and internet access.

While promising a rapid recovery and assistance, the government has used this as an opportunity to increase the military presence in the port city. In the words of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (known as AMLO), the current situation must be “leveraged” to “improve security.”

Starting in January, as part of this plan, the government will build 56 new barracks in Acapulco and nearby Coyuca de Benitez, the two counties most affected by the hurricane, in order to deploy 10,000 National Guard troops. This surge in military presence is a continuation of AMLO’s broader policy of placing national security over civil assistance and the immediate needs of the population.

The National Guard, amounting to a new wing of the military, was created by AMLO after being elected president, despite having campaigned on the promise of removing the Armed Forces from domestic security operations. It is currently composed of 118,000 members.

The government announced it will spend \$3.6 billion in reconstruction efforts. The direct aid provided to the population consisted primarily of a “cleanup” payment of \$480, a “reconstruction” payment of between \$2,000 and \$3,500 depending on the assessed property damage, and a home appliance package consisting of a cooking range, a fridge, a mattress, cooking pans and an electric fan.

Although the government claims that 96 percent of these aid packages have been delivered, the distribution of relief efforts has been marred by inefficiency and confusion. As a result, a number of protests have broken out in the affected communities. Residents of

these neighborhoods have denounced the difficulties in locating their distribution centers and the bureaucratic hurdles that have prevented some of them from receiving aid, with instances of families being denied aid due to lost documentation or bureaucratic errors.

After waiting for hours in the sun to receive aid, some of these workers have been turned away for lack of required identification. As one worker expressed to *La Jornada*, “in order to get aid, one has to suffer.” In other cases, census glitches have prevented entire communities from receiving aid packages. In response, the government has blamed the workers themselves, claiming that people have been abusing the system by registering multiple times. Asking for “responsibility” and “patience,” officials have asserted that aid will eventually reach the affected communities.

This aid has proven insufficient for many workers who not only lost their homes but also their jobs. According to Julian Uriostegui Carbajal, president of the Council of Industrial and Business Chambers of Guerrero, around 5,000 formal jobs have been lost. In Acapulco, a city which according to the Department of Labor and Social Welfare ranks second nationwide in the number of people employed in the informal economy, with 78.1 percent of the working population engaged in such employment, these figures are only the tip of the iceberg.

The WWS spoke with Lulú, a worker previously employed as a housekeeper in one of the luxury apartments offered for rent on AirBnB. She explained that since she rented her home, the owner of the dwelling is the one who registered in the census and ended up receiving the aid.

She explained, “When I say I had to start over, this is literally my situation. I had to swallow the embarrassment and the anxiety of seeing my children sleep on the floor, but thankfully someone gave us a mattress.”

Unable to find work, she decided to leave the city in search of a job. She added, “Since I lost everything I decided to move to [Mexico City]. There are many families in Acapulco in the same situation as me, but I didn’t want to stay so as not to burden my parents.”

Speaking about the condition of the workers that remain in Acapulco, she commented, “Everyone I knew in Acapulco is working cleanup jobs, picking up debris at their previous jobs. There’s no other choice

since there are no more tourism jobs, as far as I know.”

This hasn’t kept the pseudo-left media from heralding the recovery efforts as an unprecedented success under AMLO’s presidency, asserting that unemployment has not risen and normalcy is returning to the port city. As proof of this supposed return to normalcy, AMLO said, “Yesterday night I flew over Acapulco and I was very happy to see there are many houses with Christmas lights.” These narratives gloss over the hardships faced by workers who are struggling to make ends meet, whether by working any job they are able to get or by leaving the city altogether.

The unprecedented rapid intensification of Hurricane Otis from a tropical storm to a Category 5 hurricane in just 12 hours is an indicator of the escalating climate crisis. Climate scientists have linked such rapid intensifications to warmer ocean temperatures, which are a direct consequence of the increased levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

The Otis catastrophe not only exemplifies the immediate impact of climate change but also serves as a warning of the increasing frequency and severity of such natural disasters. The failure to adequately prepare for and respond to these events speaks to the inability of the capitalist system to address the underlying issue of climate change, including in its disproportionate impact on poorer regions and communities.

Capitalism cannot provide a solution to the escalating and more frequent climate disasters, themselves a result of the subordination of all aspects of human enterprise to the generation of profit. Two months after Hurricane Otis, Acapulco continues to endure the consequences of a disaster that exemplifies this reality with stark clarity. Only a fundamental reorganization of society on the basis of satisfying human needs rather than the pursuit of private profit will be able to confront the climate crisis.



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