

Arctic blast brings deadly cold to 231 million in the US

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An Arctic blast of brutally cold weather hit nearly every state in the US over the weekend and brought deadly conditions including record low temperatures, blizzards and high winds. There were scattered reports of deaths among the homeless and others affected by the cold wave, but no systematic national count is carried out to monitor the impact.

As is the case with every extreme weather event in recent decades, the “bomb cyclone” exposed the decrepit condition of the US infrastructure and revealed the lack of government preparedness and a callous disregard for the most vulnerable sections of the population.

More than 100 million people from the Canadian border to the Mexican border are currently under wind-chill alerts and most of the lower 48 states have some type of winter weather warning.

The National Weather Service reported wind-chill effective temperatures could reach minus 30 degrees Fahrenheit in the Plains and minus 50 in Montana and the Dakotas. Wind-chill temperatures as low as minus 45 can cause frostbite in as little as 5 minutes.

The Arctic blast is expected to impact 79 percent of the US geographically, from Oregon to Mississippi and Florida by the end of the week, with more than 231 million Americans experiencing below average temperatures.

Many areas of the country are unprepared for severe winter weather and were forced to take emergency measures. Dozens of school districts canceled classes in Tennessee, Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama following the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, with temperatures expected to reach a low point on Tuesday.

The mayor of Shelby County (Memphis), Tennessee, declared a state of emergency after several inches of snow fell followed by extremely cold temperatures. A message from the mayor said people should “stay off the street today, and if you can do it safely, please check in on your neighbors.”

Tate Reeves, governor of Mississippi, declared a state of emergency and warned residents to prepare for extreme

winter weather. On social media, Reeves claimed his declaration, “will allow us to mobilize state assets, and better support response and recovery efforts.” However, roads in the northern part of the state had already started to ice over by the time his statement was released around 4 p.m. Sunday.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), a bomb cyclone is a storm that rapidly intensifies and undergoes a significant drop in air pressure. The system typically develops over the ocean or off a coast in the winter. It begins in the temperate latitudes and strengthens quickly, with the atmospheric pressure at its center dropping swiftly, a process called “bombogenesis.”

The current weather system, being called Winter Storm Heather by meteorologists, is picking up fresh Arctic air as it moves from the south to the northeast this week, dropping snow and leaving icing conditions in its wake. The sudden drop in temperatures is the result of Arctic air escaping the polar vortex, a high-altitude swirl of winds surrounded by a lower-altitude band called the polar jet stream.

According to an article in *Scientific American*, “If the polar vortex gets disrupted, however, the jet stream can become wavy and carry frigid air much farther south than usual in an Arctic blast. Sometimes this frigid air brings snow and ice; other times the weather is dry but bitterly cold.”

While scientists are still working through the precise cause of the polar vortex disruptions, many experts point to climate change as likely playing a role. Judah Cohen, a climate scientist at the company Verisk Atmospheric and Environmental Research, told *Scientific American* that this winter’s melting sea ice near Scandinavia coupled with high snowfall near Siberia set up a thermal contrast, which drove the polar jet stream into waves.

The polar vortex typically “wakes up” around January, Cohen said, so it makes sense that the sharp chill from an Arctic blast is being felt now since the stage was set by these distant trends. Cohen went on to say the current blast, “will be a very impressive—certainly one of the most impressive

Arctic outbreaks of this century anyway.”

The extremely cold weather once again exposed the fragile condition of the electricity infrastructure across the US. Approximately 200,000 Michigan customers of DTE Energy and Consumers Energy were without power beginning on Friday during snowstorms that hit the Great Lakes region.

The power grid in Texas was stressed and set a new record for demand on Monday. The Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT) reported that power usage was the most demand on the grid ever recorded during the winter months. For a second day in a row ERCOT issued a “conservation appeal,” this one set for Tuesday morning from 6 a.m. to 10 a.m. in anticipation of potential outages.

The Texas agency issued a statement Monday which said, “Tomorrow’s conservation appeal does not indicate ERCOT is experiencing emergency conditions at this time. ERCOT will remain vigilant and communicate further if conditions change because of continued freezing temperatures and very high demand in the morning hours.”

As of this writing, at least 15 people have died from circumstances associated with the severe winter weather:

- **Wisconsin:** The deaths of three homeless men in Milwaukee, Wisconsin are being investigated as cases of hypothermia. A 64-year-old man was discovered under a bridge and a 69-year-old man was found in a vehicle he had been using as a shelter. A 40-year-old man was found dead today shortly before 10 a.m. “on a heating mechanism near the railroad tracks,” according to the Milwaukee County Medical Examiner’s Office. Another Wisconsin man died on Friday while snowblowing his driveway in the Milwaukee suburb of Franklin.

- **Illinois:** On Friday, a man was found dead in the Chicago suburb of Schiller Park, apparently from exposure to the cold.

- **Michigan:** A 60-year-old homeless man was found dead in Orion Township, in the Oakland County suburbs of Detroit, on Sunday morning. He had died of exposure overnight, according to press accounts.

- **Idaho:** In Idaho, one man is missing and believed to be dead after being caught with two others in an avalanche near the Montana border on Thursday.

- **Mississippi and Arkansas:** On Saturday, two drivers were killed in separate accidents involving snowy conditions, one in Humphrey County, Mississippi, and the other in White County, Arkansas.

- **Oregon:** Also on Saturday, trees fell and killed two people in Portland and Lake Oswego, Oregon. The deaths of two other men were being investigated as cases of hypothermia.

- **Utah:** In Utah, after nearly four feet of snow fell in the mountains during a 24-hour period, a snowmobiler was struck and killed on Sunday evening by a semitruck near

Salt Lake City while attempting to cross the highway.

The catastrophic levels of homelessness in the US are exposed during the winter when there is a sharp increase in hypothermia deaths. In Seattle, Washington, for example, the number of homeless deaths in 2023 set a record of 415, according to data from the King County Medical Examiner’s Office. That was an increase of 34 percent from the previous record of 309 deaths in 2022.

The US government does not maintain an official count of the number of people who die while experiencing homelessness. When a homeless person dies, their housing status is rarely recorded. It is estimated by the National Coalition for the Homeless that approximately 700 people die each year from hypothermia.

Along with the “forever COVID” policy of capitalist governments throughout the world that has permitted millions to die from an entirely preventable disease, the increasing number of deaths from extreme weather events, including the present deadly Arctic blast and winter storm, are accepted as inevitable.

The truth is that the public does not have to accept the inevitability of the death and destruction from hurricanes, tsunamis, tornadoes and bomb cyclones, the greatest burden of which falls upon the working class and the poor. The capitalist billionaire elite will not take measures to prevent the impact of severe weather events—or for that matter adequately assist those who are directly impacted by them—because to do so would cut into their profits and wealth accumulation.

The working class can and must take the necessary measures to put an end to the existential threats posed by the capitalist system, including nuclear world war, climate disaster and pandemics, by organizing itself internationally and fighting for world socialist revolution.



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