

Hurricane Helene: Capitalism turns a natural disaster into a social catastrophe

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Over the past two days, the full catastrophe produced by Hurricane Helene in a broad swath of the southeastern United States has begun to be revealed.

The death toll topped 130 Monday night, according to reports from six states monitored by multiple news outlets. Given that at least 600 more people are missing and unaccounted for, the death toll seems likely to skyrocket. This could make Helene the deadliest storm to hit the US mainland since Katrina drowned the city of New Orleans in 2005. Hurricane Maria, which struck Puerto Rico in 2017, killing more than 3,000 people, is the worst natural disaster to hit any US territory in the past half century.

Asheville, North Carolina is at the epicenter of the tragedy. The city sits in a river valley in the Appalachian Mountains and was hit with nearly two feet (60 centimeters) of rain.

Officials of Buncombe County, which includes Asheville, confirmed at a press conference Monday that at least 40 people were killed by the hurricane's high winds and heavy rains. Nearly 100,000 people are without power, about 40 percent of the county's population, and water systems have collapsed, due to a combination of flooding, wind damage, and loss of power.

Press reports said that 6,000 emergency calls had been made to find people missing in western North Carolina, including 3,900 in Buncombe County alone. Both Asheville city and Buncombe County schools are closed for at least the first two days of the week, and in smaller rural counties, schools may be closed indefinitely.

While the level of destruction in western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee is apocalyptic, there are published estimates that the total damage in the six worst-hit states--Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia--could come to more than \$150 billion. Besides Asheville, affected cities range from Tampa, Florida, which was hit by a record storm surge, to Augusta, Georgia, where power remains out for 200,000 people, to the Atlanta metropolitan area, which experienced an all-time record rainfall of 11 inches in less than 48 hours.

Despite well publicized claims of a massive relief effort,

most storm survivors have received little or nothing. A spokesman for the North Carolina National Guard said that guard troops have brought in 100,000 pounds of water and food through airlifts at the Asheville airport, intended for distribution in eight counties in western North Carolina. Given the nearly one million people affected just in that area, that comes to a few ounces per person, three days after the hurricane upended their lives.

It is now nearly two decades since Hurricane Katrina. At the time, the WSWs explained the seeming irrationality of the response of the US ruling class to warnings about the precarious state of the levees in New Orleans. We wrote:

None of the measures required to protect the city and the entire region were implemented, even though doing so would have cost a fraction of the outlays required to address, even in the most rudimentary way, the devastation caused by Katrina and the government's failure to respond.

Nothing was done because over the past several decades the American ruling class, under administrations of both political parties, has sought to systematically cut all social spending, including spending on public infrastructure. Bound up with deregulation, privatization and the dismantling of social programs, this policy was designed to enrich a tiny minority of the population at the expense of the American people as a whole. In this, it has succeeded to the point where the United States is the most socially polarized of all the major industrialized countries.

Hurricane Katrina has laid bare the ugly face of American capitalist society—the enormous social inequality, the impoverishment of broad sections of the population, and the looting of society by a financial oligarchy.

At the time, the corporate media and the capitalist politicians of the Democratic and Republican parties claimed they had learned their lesson—at the expense of the lives of more than 1,300 people, mostly poor residents of New Orleans—and would take steps to prevent further such disasters.

What in fact has been done? Far from improving the country's infrastructure, it has further deteriorated. The most basic measures to save lives—systematic warning systems, coordinated methods for evacuation, infrastructure to protect against mudslides and flash floods—are inadequate or non-existent. And social inequality is far greater now than two decades ago, vastly increased by two multi-trillion-dollar bailouts of the rich, in 2008 and 2020.

Where its vital interests are concerned, the capitalist ruling elite can mobilize vast resources: for war in Ukraine, for genocide in Gaza, for bailing out Wall Street. But when it comes to the lives of working people, whether in the urban side streets of New Orleans or the back roads of Appalachia, the ruling class declares with one voice, “There is no money.”

Fueled by climate change, hurricanes, tornado outbreaks, heat waves, cold waves and wild fires continue to ravage the United States, taking hundreds of lives each year. And now Hurricane Helene has already surpassed the death toll of last year's Maui wildfire, of hurricanes Harvey, Rita, Ike, Irma and Sandy, and will soon have caused more death and destruction than Hurricane Ian (2022), the previous worst since Katrina.

Two processes are involved here, both linked to the global crisis of the capitalist system. Climate change, driven by the uncontrolled capitalist exploitation of fossil fuels like oil, natural gas and coal, continues to accelerate, with little prospect of the world achieving the most recent target of climate scientists, limiting the increase in global temperatures to below 2 degrees Centigrade by 2050.

Warming air temperatures enable storms to accumulate more moisture, increasing the rainfall they generate and widening their scale. At one point, Helene was affecting nearly a quarter of the United States, hitting parts of 15 states, shutting down power, for example, to 40 percent of South Carolina, more than 300 miles from where it made landfall.

The ruling class is no more capable of addressing the catastrophic consequences of climate change than it has been able to address the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which, due to the subordination of public health to private profit, has killed more than 20 million globally and more than 1.4 million in the US alone.

Side by side with the worsening threat of such “natural” disasters—“natural” only in the sense that nature is being

turned into a catalogue of horrors by capitalism—is the weakening ability of modern capitalist society to withstand such disasters and remedy their worst consequences.

This social and economic system has been presided over by both capitalist parties.

Since Helene struck only five weeks before the presidential election, the Democratic and Republican candidates quickly proclaimed their sympathy for the victims and pledged federal and state aid. Fascist Republican ex-president Donald Trump visited Valdosta, Georgia, Monday, to take in the distribution of relief supplies by a fundamentalist church. He managed to avoid the degrading scenes that accompanied his visit to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria, where he was seen tossing rolls of paper towels to angry survivors of that storm.

Democrat Kamala Harris rushed back to Washington for a photo op visit to the headquarters of FEMA, cutting short a fundraising trip to California expected to raise more than \$60 million for her campaign, mainly from Silicon Valley moguls and San Francisco financiers. The White House announced that President Biden will visit North Carolina on Wednesday, although it will apparently be limited to a visit with the governor in Raleigh, the state capital, followed by a helicopter overflight of the devastated Asheville region.

As always, these protestations of concern, dutifully repeated in the media, will disappear into nothing as soon as the cameras retreat, while those affected will be left to fend for themselves, until the next disaster hits.

Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Joseph Kishore issued a statement Sunday, calling for “a multi-billion program to provide immediate relief to all those affected by the hurricane. Working people and retirees who have lost their homes, vehicles and livelihoods must be made whole....” The statement also called for “a massive increase in funding for disaster preparedness, infrastructure repair, and emergency services.”

Securing these basic rights and social needs is inseparable from the development of a movement in the working class against the entire social and economic order. Capitalism is leading humanity to social, political and ecological destruction. The alternative is the mobilization of the independent political strength of the global working class in the building of a worldwide movement for socialism.



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