

Hurricane Milton and the case for socialism

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Less than two weeks after Hurricane Helene made landfall over the Big Bend region of Florida, Hurricane Milton is barreling toward Tampa Bay, compounding the already massive social disaster with another, potentially greater, catastrophe.

Official death toll estimates from Helene range as high as 243, with at least 285 still missing in North Carolina and Tennessee, making it the most deadly hurricane to hit the US mainland since Hurricane Katrina in 2005. And current estimates from Moody's Analytics note that damage could reach as high as \$34 billion, while AccuWeather has projected that the total economic loss from Hurricane Helene could reach as high as \$250 billion. More than 90,000 customers in North Carolina remain without power.

Hurricane Milton, which is currently a Category 4 storm with sustained winds of 155 mph (250 kph) and is currently traveling directly toward the Tampa metro region with 3.3 million residents, may surpass even this high toll. It has already devastated the northern coast of Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, where there were "hurricane-force winds and a life-threatening storm surge with destructive waves," according to the National Hurricane Center (NHC), which caused massive flooding and thousands of evacuations across the region.

An evacuation of an estimated one million people in Tampa Bay and the surrounding areas is currently under way, the largest since Hurricane Irma in 2017. Even before Milton has hit, the lack of infrastructure or coordinated plans to evacuate so many individuals has produced a social catastrophe, with tens of thousands being forced to sit in traffic for hours and where extra water, food and gas are scarce or nonexistent.

The danger of the situation was encapsulated by Tampa Mayor Jane Castor, who told CNN in an interview, "If you choose to stay in one of those evacuation areas, you are going to die." The National Hurricane Center (NHC) has warned, "devastating hurricane-force winds" are coming as the storm approaches landfall Wednesday and that it is an "extremely life-threatening situation."

President Joe Biden issued a similar warning, canceling a trip to Germany and Angola where he was set to promote the US-NATO war in Ukraine, telling residents to "evacuate now" and that leaving the hurricane's path is "a matter of life and death."

Yet no provisions have been made for a coordinated mass evacuation by bus, train and plane. Instead of canceling services and flights, every Amtrak passenger train could have been commissioned to evacuate tens of thousands. Every airline could have had each of their planes in the area requisitioned for one-way flights and every city, school, Greyhound and other commercial bus could have ferried out further tens of thousands or more.

Instead, individuals and families have been essentially left to fend for themselves in what is being called the worst storm to hit Tampa in more than 100 years.

Hurricane Milton formed in the Gulf of Mexico and developed into a tropical storm in the Bay of Campeche on October 5. It became a hurricane on October 6 and underwent extreme rapid intensification, caused by very warm waters in the Gulf of Mexico, and became a Category 5 hurricane that reached peak intensity a day later, the third fastest intensification ever recorded. It is currently the fifth most intense Atlantic hurricane on record.

As a result, meteorologists are warning of storm surges of up to 15 feet around Tampa Bay. The NHC has also issued a hurricane warning, with sustained surface wind speeds of up to 74 miles per hour expected to hit the region.

In the worst hit areas, houses that are two stories tall will be submerged, while gale force winds throw around everything else. The danger is compounded by the debris left behind by Hurricane Helene, which has not been fully cleared.

The rapid intensification and sustained power of Hurricane Milton is the direct result of capitalist-induced climate change. As has been predicted for decades, the more fossil fuels that are burned, the more Earth's air and ocean temperatures increase as a result. One of the many

consequences is the emergence of more powerful and destructive tropical storms and hurricanes.

Despite decades of predictions by climate scientists and increasingly dire warnings, neither the Democrats nor Republicans have made any serious efforts to alleviate the danger posed by hurricanes, or any form of extreme weather driven by climate change.

Instead, Vice President Kamala Harris bragged about how she has promoted fracking during September's debate with Trump and that the Biden-Harris administration is responsible for "the largest increase in domestic oil production in history because of an approach that recognizes that we cannot overrely on foreign oil."

Whatever tactical spats that exist between Harris and Biden on one side and Trump and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis—both ardent climate change deniers—on the other, the real aim of the American capitalist class is war. Every war in the Middle East has been about controlling the region's vast oil reserves in preparation for war against China, and the war in Ukraine was launched in part to force Europe to rely on liquefied natural gas produced by the US instead of that produced by Russia. And if Earth is to be burned and poisoned as a result, so be it.

A recent report in the journal *BioScience* notes that fossil fuel concentrations in the atmosphere, especially carbon dioxide and methane, are at record levels. The growth rate of methane, 80 times more potent than CO₂, has climbed especially fast as a result of expanding mining, drilling, landfills and unregulated agriculture.

The report, titled "Perilous times on planet Earth," warns, "We are on the brink of an irreversible climate disaster." It notes the recent figures that "the 3 hottest days ever occurred in July 2024," and that only 6 percent of climate scientists believe that an average global temperature increase of 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) can be averted. Most predict a rise of at least 2.5 degrees Celsius (4.5 degrees Fahrenheit), and nearly half have estimated a rise of more than 3 degrees Celsius (5.4 degrees Fahrenheit).

Each scenario is more apocalyptic than the next, with what is now occurring with Hurricane Milton only a precursor. Along with continued and more extreme weather, there are projections of "widespread famines, conflicts, mass migration ... posing catastrophic consequences for both humanity and the biosphere."

Critically, the report notes that climate change is part of a more fundamental social crisis. "Global heating, although it is catastrophic, is merely one aspect of a

profound polycrisis that includes environmental degradation, rising economic inequality, and biodiversity loss." They add that the solution is through "transformative science-based solutions across all aspects of society."

In a statement on X, Joe Kishore, the presidential candidate of the Socialist Equality Party, wrote

Climate change is fundamentally a class issue. It is not "humanity" that is responsible for the destruction of the planet but the capitalist system. The same system that produces inequality, exploitation and war is also hurtling the world towards environmental catastrophe.

The solution to climate change is the abolition of the capitalist system and the establishment of a society in which scientific and rational planning for human need take priority—socialism. A scientific understanding must be made both of Earth's climate and of human society, specifically the laws of capitalist development.

But the solution will never be found in appeals to the powers that be. The US ruling elite serves capitalism, the root cause of war, fascism, social inequality and the accelerating ecological crisis. The international working class, objectively opposed to the capitalist mode of production, is the only social force capable of bringing about its end.



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