

Mid-South flood survivors speak to WSWS

Our correspondents
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Residents in flood-stricken Nashville, Tennessee, and eastern Kentucky spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters about their experiences. Both regions were declared federal disaster areas this week after a severe storm hit the mid-south during the weekend of May 1-2 (See accompanying article: “US mid-South faces long-term flood impact”).

Nashville, Tennessee

A reporting team in Nashville visited food and water distribution sites in the city. Residents trickled in one at a time to receive supplies and legal aid to assist in recouping their losses. At one facility, volunteers said that in the first two days after the flooding, 300 to 500 people sought help.

Many residents turned to emergency centers for bottled water after one of the city’s two water treatment plants was submerged by floodwaters and water supply capacity dropped to 37 percent. Currently, city officials estimate that capacity is close to 90 percent, but rationing is still being advised to avoid putting strain on the system. Volunteers at the Hadley Park flood relief program estimated that 75 to 100 residents still rely on the center each day.

Combined with widespread property damage, the water restrictions made basic cleaning and sanitation considerably more difficult for flood-affected neighborhoods. On May 12, an outdoor laundry facility sponsored by Tide Laundry set up 32 washing machines in a shopping center parking lot. WSWS reporters spoke to a number of residents there.

Tyrone Hall told the WSWS that the flood waters forced him to abandon his home, and that he lost his car and personal belongings. He said he had flood insurance that will cover the cost of repairing the home, but not his personal possessions. He hopes to receive a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) grant that will cover his expenses for the hotel he is currently living in.

Tyrone told the WSWS he considered himself lucky to have flood insurance, because people who moved in to his neighborhood before 2001, when he moved there, did not have it. He said it will take four to six weeks to completely repair his house, but he hopes to move back in before then. He believes

the media has not adequately conveyed the extent of the losses that so many people have incurred.

Julie Crowe is a teacher. Prior to the May 2 flooding, Julie had been living in the basement of her house. With the basement ruined by floodwaters, she has now moved upstairs to her children’s room. She said that because her home was situated in a designated flood plain, flood insurance could only be purchased from the government, and the government had refused to sell to her. She told the WSWS that none of her neighbors had insurance either.

Harold Barnes is retired. He told the WSWS that his house had been completely submerged in the flooding and was destroyed beyond repair. Harold lost all of his possessions, including his motor home. He said he had flood insurance to cover the house, but not personal property, including his roommate’s wheelchair. Harold’s car insurance will cover the motor home, but he said it was an old model and therefore does not expect to get enough to replace it. Like hundreds of other Nashville residents, he and his roommate are currently living in a hotel, where they will remain until Friday. He does not know where they will go after that, because all of the affordable hotels are completely booked.

Richard Kowalski is a former bus driver who says many of the city’s buses were damaged by the flood. Richard’s mother-in-law, Rosa Ward, who is disabled and requires special medical equipment to keep her alive, has been forced to move in with him because her downstairs apartment was flooded. Neither Richard nor Rosa had flood insurance, and do not know whether or not Rosa will be able to move back to her apartment. Rosa noted that people continue to suffer from the effects of the flood, and the hazards left in its wake are still causing fatal accidents.

Eastern Kentucky

Towns in the eastern portion of Kentucky are mainly situated down in the narrow valleys between mountains. Decades of intensive excavating, mining, and logging have made the area more prone to erosion, rock and mudslides, and flash flooding. Low-income housing is especially vulnerable to flooding, since

cheaper land is in lower-lying areas, including designated floodplains.

Morehead, Kentucky, is the central town in Rowan County, one of a handful of counties that has been recognized by FEMA as a disaster area. All told, 81 counties and 38 cities have declared a state of emergency in Kentucky.

Morehead is known as the “hardwood capital” for its large logging operations. Smaller towns nearby, including Sharkey, Farmers, Olive Hill, and Soldier, were also devastated by floodwaters.

Laura Vencill, a library paraprofessional at the Morehead State University library, spoke to the WSWS about the flood. Laura and her sisters volunteered at locally-organized relief efforts in the area to dispense food, water, clothing, and basic supplies to many of the affected residents.

Laura had many relatives, neighbors, and friends who were affected by the flooding, though her own house was situated at a much higher elevation out of town. The flood waters rose very rapidly on May 2, and flash floods prompted road closures in town, preventing her sister’s family from returning home in the evening. “By the time they were ready to leave,” Laura explained, “most of the major highways in the area were closed, either for impassable flooding on the roads or because of mudslides blocking the roads.” Interstate 64 exits in and out of the town were closed as well.

That night, Laura said, she and her husband became concerned for neighbors down the road, whose animals were kept near a swelling creek crossing through their farm. “Against our better judgment, we took our truck and tried to get to their house to help move animals,” she said. “Unfortunately, the route to their house was blocked by downed lines, either electric or telephone. There was a crew working on it, but they had no idea when they would be able to clear the road, and this route was also getting covered up in water from Porter Creek. We had to turn back and go home.” Their friends were left without phone, electricity or water for over a week. They managed to save their flock of sheep and pigs by carrying them through waist-deep water, Laura said, but because of the power outage they lost nearly 100 chicks in their warmers.

Laura told the WSWS that nearly two weeks after the flood, she has yet to hear an official lifting of a boil-water advisory put over the Morehead area. “I haven’t heard any more information on the radio about it,” she said. “Our water is still very cloudy and has a strong smell of chlorine or ammonia. I don’t know if it’s safe to drink or not!”

Laura commented on the initiative of local residents in emergency relief efforts, noting that she and her sisters got involved through Facebook and email networking. “I think the reason these events were organized so quickly is because the people organizing them were part of the communities that were so badly affected,” she said. “They knew the need immediately and were able to organize through people they knew.... We walked down the main drag of Farmers and everybody’s

houses were being emptied of everything, and it was all wet, muddy and ruined.” She said one elderly couple, whose home was gutted, “lost everything they owned and they have no insurance. Much of what they owned was piled in heaps in front of their house.”

A distribution was held at a local business in Farmers, where, because it was “at the high point of the road, up from lower, flooded-out houses,” Laura explained, “it was ideal for people to walk up from where they were camped in their driveways to get supplies.”

Laura noted that local officials could not turn in FEMA applications until after federal coordinators visited the area. She told the WSWS that some of the smaller towns had yet to be inspected. “Olive Hill, particularly the downtown area, was flooded badly and there hasn’t been nearly as much attention paid to them,” she said. “Businesses and homes there were simply abandoned and some still are. As of the middle of this past week, no one in Olive Hill or Soldier had phones. I only hear things through the friends I have there, nothing on the radio or news about it.”

The WSWS also spoke to Joe Schubert, a full-time art student at MSU, whose Clearfield apartment was flooded. He said he was able to save most of his personal property because he moved many belongings to the second floor of his townhouse when water began pouring in under the doors. “The water had risen but stayed in the parking lot most of that Sunday evening, but around dusk the water came up rapidly,” he said. “The water level rose a few feet quickly and flooded the downstairs of my apartment and the ones connected and across from it, and a lot of other homes on this side of Morehead. This particular building got about a foot and a half of water in it, and then it all drained over the night.”

“I rent but I don’t have any flood insurance,” Joe told the WSWS, “and I believe my landlord mentioned not having any either, but we aren’t near any creek or other waterways. The water just started standing on the lower part of the streets and rose up from there.” Joe said he had applied for FEMA aid and was waiting to have his claim inspected. Along with neighbors and his landlord, Joe has worked on cleaning out the apartments while they await inspectors.



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