

Hurricane Milton sets storm intensity records as it moves toward Florida Gulf Coast

Kevin Reed
7 October 2024

Hurricane Milton became one of the strongest storms ever recorded in the Atlantic on Monday as it reached maximum sustained winds of 180 miles per hour and barreled across the Gulf of Mexico toward Florida.

The intense Category 5 hurricane is currently projected to make landfall in the Tampa Bay region—an area with more than 3.3 million residents—late on Wednesday with life-threatening force.

Evacuation orders were issued for millions of people in nine Florida counties as of Monday evening including Charlotte, Citrus, Hillsborough, Lee, Manatee, Pasco, Pinellas and Sarasota. More than 50 Florida counties are now under state of emergency orders.

Florida's emergency management director Kevin Guthrie said people needed to leave vulnerable areas on Monday, rather than wait any longer. "If your plan calls for you to evacuate, you should do so today," he said.

The National Hurricane Center (NHC) issued a statement at 5:00 p.m. on Monday that said, "Milton has the potential to be one of the most destructive hurricanes on record for west-central Florida."

The storm achieved what is known as "extreme rapid intensification," which is defined as a 58 miles per hour increase in 24 hours. Milton leapt from a Category 1 to 5 storm as winds increased by 95 miles per hour in 24 hours.

Meteorologists have described the explosive intensification of the storm—which is fueled by record-warm water temperatures in the Gulf driven by capitalist-induced climate change—as "remarkable," "horrific," "scary" and "astronomical."

Noah Bergren of Fox 35 Orlando wrote on Twitter/X, "I am at a loss for words to meteorologically describe [to] you the storms small eye and intensity. 897mb pressure with 180 MPH max sustained winds and gusts 200+ MPH. This is now the 4th strongest hurricane ever recorded by pressure on this side of the world. The eye is TINY at nearly 3.8 miles wide. This hurricane is nearing the mathematical limit of what Earth's atmosphere over this ocean water can produce."

Milton is expected to reach peak intensity by Tuesday morning and then fall to a Category 4 or 3 hurricane as it makes landfall. However, it will also scale up in dimension and the NHC is warning of a surge of 5 to 10 feet along most of the Florida's Gulf Coast and up to 10 to 15 feet in Tampa Bay.

These are the highest storm surge predictions ever made for the Tampa Bay region and nearly double the levels reached two weeks ago by Hurricane Helene which struck Florida's Big Bend region as a Category 4 storm with 140 miles per hour winds. Piles of debris remain outside flood-damaged homes up and down the western Florida coast. The refuse from the previous storm is expected to contribute to Milton's damage as it is whipped around in the high

winds.

Helene moved north over a 500-mile stretch of destruction inundating parts of Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia and Tennessee and, as of this writing, killing 241 people.

Some of the most devastating hurricanes to hit the Gulf Coast have been former Category 4 or 5 storms that were weakening but expanding in size at landfall, including Katrina (2005), Rita (2005) and Opal (1995).

Speaking to CNN, Jamie Rhome, deputy director of the NHC, said wind speeds could dip below 130 miles per hour but Milton will become more damaging. Rhome said, "These big storms, these large-size storms, produce more impact. So, this growth in size is going to more than compensate for the reduction in intensity, and it's going to cause problems because you're going to get a broader swath of impact, and then things like storm surge are actually made much worse by the bigger size."

Rhome continued, "This case it's going to be a direct impact, a direct shot, and more powerful at that. So we're going to have potentially catastrophic wind damage over a densely populated portion of the Florida peninsula. ... Plus, the storm surge is going to be worse than we saw in Helene in some cases."

The National Weather Service office in the Tampa region advised residents to follow evacuation orders. "If Milton stays on its course this will be the most powerful hurricane to hit Tampa Bay in over 100 years," it wrote. "No one in the area has ever experienced a hurricane this strong before."

The Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater area is one of the more populated metro regions in the United States and the second-largest in the state after Miami-Fort Lauderdale. Massachusetts Institute of Technology meteorology professor Kerry Emanuel told the Associated Press, "It's a huge population. It's very exposed, very inexperienced, and that's a losing proposition. I always thought Tampa would be the city to worry about most."

The last time Tampa was hit directly by a Category 3 hurricane was October 1921 when the population was just 120,000. Eight people were killed, some of whom drowned in the storm surge that inundated the shoreline, tearing up fishing piers and submerging railroad cars.

The increasing intensity and frequency of massively destructive hurricanes is exposing the criminal indifference and unpreparedness of the US political establishment for the impact of climate change on masses of people. Ron DeSantis, the fascistic governor of Florida who is an outspoken advocate of fossil fuels, has been spending his time in office removing the words "climate change" from Florida statutes and leaving the public completely unable to respond in a timely manner to repeated weather catastrophes.

While Governor DeSantis has issued evacuation orders, the state and federal government has no organized means of ensuring that millions of people are able to get out of the range of the storm surge, not to mention surviving the impact of power outages and physical destruction of infrastructure when the storm cuts a path across the Florida peninsula. Those with the means to evacuate on their own have found themselves stuck for hours in their cars on the main freeways with no access to gasoline as gas stations are not being refueled after residents filled their cars and stocked up for their generators.

With days of advanced warning from meteorologists, the means exist to quickly and safely move millions of people out of harms way, but no preparations have been made. Once again, under the capitalist system, millions are to be left to fend for themselves, resulting in preventable suffering and death. The question asked by the *World Socialist Web Site* in the days prior to the arrival of Hurricane Irma, which claimed the lives of 82 people in August 2017, remains relevant: why aren't trains being used to evacuate people from the path of Hurricane Milton?

Carla, a Tampa resident, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* and described the chaos that is unfolding in the area, "The storm is intensifying as we speak, so I really don't know what I'm going to do because, if you try to evacuate, you could get stuck on an interstate or run out of gas, unless you left a day or two early."

Carla said there are no rental cars or hotel rooms available because of the impact of Hurricane Helene:

The other storm literally just happened, so all those people that lost their cars due to the storm have all the rental cars. All those people that were displaced are the majority of people taking up the hotels right now. So, you have all of that from the last two weeks and now you put this right on top of it.

There was just a guy on the news this morning at Tampa airport. He was trying to get a flight out but his flight was canceled. Then he tried to rent a car and the people were like, "Cars? There's no cars here." And this was yesterday.

She also confirmed that gas stations are running out of gasoline:

I can tell you the lines are long ... but it's kind of a hit or miss on if you're going to get gas or how much gas you're gonna get.

People are so scared now from what they've seen, you know with that last storm. I really don't want to use the word "overreacting," I think that'd be a little bit extreme, but I think they are maybe buying a little bit more than what they need and they're not necessarily careful about it because you see people filling up bleach bottles with gas. Those two don't mix and they're not supposed to be in that container.

Carla said that many residents are ill-prepared for the consequences of a powerful hurricane and often face difficulties in attaining adequate insurance for the homes. She said:

In Florida, Citizens Insurance is the last hope for a lot of people. It's state-run but their policies are not written like a policy that I would want to buy at all if I had a house in Florida.

Another thing that I'm going to tell you that you see on the news that they're talking about is people saying, "my mortgage company told me I am not in a flood zone." There is no specific flood zone in the state because any zone can be a flood zone because of the weather.

Three or four years ago, a storm turned at the last minute and went towards Sarasota and Fort Myers. I know a few people whose houses were destroyed and those people are still trying to recover. So, recovery efforts and, I don't think this is specific to Florida, are very slow. A lot of people end up "self-insuring," because they can't get insurance or can't afford it and they are responsible for their own damages to their house. So, imagine how much out-of-pocket money that is.

Carla also noted the impact of the storm on the working class:

Right now, you have people making \$15 an hour and they're taking away Medicaid from them and forcing them into marketplace insurance. They are not making it easy for people who try to earn a living every day. There are InstaCart workers out here making deliveries of groceries and other staples.

I asked the girl why she was still working with the storm coming and she said she was working all the way up until they tell us we can't work. If she doesn't work, she doesn't get paid. So, when the storm hits and the businesses shut down, what are people going to do? You're looking a possible evictions and utility shut-offs.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact