

Hurricane Milton leaves behind a swath of devastation from Tampa Bay to Daytona Beach

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Hurricane Milton careened across the Florida Peninsula throughout Wednesday night and moved off over the Atlantic Ocean early Thursday morning. A dozen people are known to have died as a result of Milton, so far. At least five were killed in the widespread outbreak of tornadoes preceding landfall of the massive storm late Wednesday. Insurers estimate the total losses from Milton could reach \$60 billion.

Milton was a Category 3 hurricane with sustained winds of 130 mph (209 kph) when it made landfall 70 miles south of Tampa at Siesta Key, a barrier island partially in the city of Sarasota. After rapidly intensifying into a powerful Category 5 storm over the Gulf of Mexico with winds exceeding 180 mph (289 kph) on Monday, Milton's wind speeds decreased as the storm approached the west coast of Florida.

More than 3.3 million people were without power at the peak Thursday and just a few hundreds of thousands have been restored since. There are at least 12 active boil water notices issued across the state.

Sarasota County, where Milton made landfall, saw the highest storm surge at between 8-10 feet. Elsewhere, storm surges varied between 3-6 feet from Charlotte Harbor to Naples.

Tampa Bay experienced a "reverse storm surge," which caused water to drain out of the bay rather than inundate it. This phenomenon was due to Milton landing south of the area where the offshore winds moved in a clockwise, east-west direction away from shore.

The hurricane dumped at least 6 to 12 inches of rain on its course from the Gulf of Mexico to the Atlantic Ocean. The heaviest rainfall was concentrated in a relatively narrow strip of the state, extending from the

Tampa area in the southwest, through Orlando, and up toward Daytona Beach in the northeast.

A flash flood emergency was issued from Tampa to St. Petersburg which recorded almost 19 inches of rain. Plant City, about 30 miles east of Tampa, suffered devastating flooding. Home of the largest strawberry farms in Florida, the average income for a household in the unincorporated city is \$37,584. Residents in one mobile home park reported waist-deep water early Thursday morning.

St. Petersburg, with a population of roughly 261,000, bore the brunt of Milton's winds. The fabric roof covering Tropicana Field, home of the Tampa Bay Rays baseball team, is in tatters. While no one was injured, the stadium was to have been a staging area for emergency responders, with thousands of cots set up on the field.

A construction crane, which is building what will be the tallest residential tower on Florida's Gulf Coast, smashed into a neighboring building that houses the newsroom of the *Tampa Bay Times*. No one was injured in the accident.

The most distinctive, and surprising, feature of Milton was the onslaught of tornadoes that arrived ahead of its landfall. While it is not uncommon for hurricanes to produce tornadoes, they arrived earlier than expected and were exceptionally strong and long-lived.

As reported by the *Washington Post*, the National Weather Service issued 126 tornado warnings, with as many as 18 active at the same time across the state. There were 48 confirmed reports of tornadoes touching down, some of which may have traveled over five miles, exceeding the average tornado distance of 3.5

miles.

Once the National Weather Service confirms the number of tornado touchdowns, this outbreak could be among the worst in Florida's recorded history. Previously, the highest number of tornadoes recorded in Florida in a single day was 22.

Approximately 125 homes were destroyed by tornadoes before Milton made landfall, largely in mobile home parks and senior citizen communities.

Republican Governor Ron DeSantis stated during a news conference that 9,000 National Guard members were on the ground, as well as 50,000 utility workers from around the country who were on hand to assist with repairs.

Comparisons are already being drawn between Milton and Hurricane Helene, which struck Florida's Gulf Coast two weeks ago before wreaking devastation from Georgia to Tennessee. Regardless of strength, size and cost, both hurricanes brought upheaval and despair to residents in their paths and exposed the reality of the dire social conditions that millions confront in the United States.

Climate change fueled by the capitalist pursuit of profit is increasing the frequency of hurricanes. This is primarily due to the warming of the oceans due to the emissions of carbon into the atmosphere through the burning of oil and other fossil fuels.

The *Guardian* reported that since the 1970s, the number of storms intensifying into Category 4 or 5 hurricanes—with winds of at least 131 mph (211 kmh)—has approximately doubled in the North Atlantic. “If you look back historically, storms used to intensify at a slower rate than they do now,” said Phil Klotzbach, a hurricane forecasting specialist at Colorado State University.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted yesterday:

Millions trapped in the path of catastrophes like Helene and Milton, experiencing sudden and massive deprivation, losing their homes and possessions even if they manage to survive, can see the disparity between the social need and the aid provided by the state and federal governments. They can see the obvious indifference of top government officials—presidents, governors, cabinet

members—as they pour billions into war and corporate subsidies, while offering a pittance for those devastated by the storms. The fascists offer a scapegoat for this social devastation, and Trump seeks to exploit the crisis to return to the White House.

The growing challenge of climate change and other environmental issues cannot be solved within the framework of a profit-oriented economic system. Only a socialist restructuring of the global economy, where the environment is not sacrificed for profit or nationalist goals, can confront the problems of climate change on a scientific basis and stop natural disasters from turning into social catastrophes.



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