

An interview with a survivor of Hurricane Helene, stranded for nearly a week in western North Carolina

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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with Kate, a resident of the small rural community of Green Mountain, North Carolina, which was devastated last month by Hurricane Helene. She and many residents of rural towns in Florida, South Carolina, Tennessee, North Carolina, and some larger cities such as Asheville, North Carolina, are still without power, running water, reliable cellular service and basic social infrastructure.

There has been a notable lack of coverage in the mainstream media of the scope of the tragedy that has unfolded and recovery is still ongoing in many areas affected by the hurricane and its accompanying tornadoes, flash floods, landslides and high winds. Kate traveled several miles to a friend in neighboring Spruce Pine, North Carolina, who had reliable enough cellular service to allow her to speak with this reporter at length.

Kate's experience is one that thousands of Appalachian residents, those that have survived, are still trying to recover from. Scientists warn that storms such as Helene will become more frequent and grow more intense, year after year, as temperatures continue to rise due to capitalist-induced climate change. Rising temperatures on the surface of the oceans feed the intensity and rainfall potential of hurricanes, causing them to deposit huge amounts of rain in short periods of time, driven by extreme winds that often spawn tornadoes.

Although the effects of climate change have been studied for decades, the capitalist ruling class cannot and will not be compelled to make any changes on behalf of the victims or to prevent future victims of these catastrophic storms. Under the capitalist order nothing will be done that may impede the flow of profits to Wall Street shareholders or disrupt global financial interests.

The unfathomable amounts of personal wealth hoarded by billionaires such as Elon Musk, the wealthiest man in the world, would be more than enough to repair infrastructure, expand rescue efforts, deliver much needed food, water and other essentials to rural Appalachian towns. Instead, Appalachian families are mostly left on their own, facing months, and possibly years, of living without the most basic needs to sustain life. Many residents have no idea when they may have electricity or running water again.

The Republican and Democratic parties can come together overnight to sign off on hundreds of billions of dollars to fund war and even genocide. Yet they will claim there is no money to develop transportation infrastructure to evacuate and protect those in the path of these storms, even when it is known well in advance that storms and floods are coming. In the more recent Hurricane Milton, Florida residents had to choose between possibly getting trapped in traffic on crowded highways trying to evacuate, or just shelter in place and hope for survival.

It is not possible to address any of the basic problems facing the working class, the vast majority of society, without addressing the

massive social inequality that exists in the capitalist system. The working class must seize the ill-gotten wealth of the ruling class and distribute it based on human need and not private profits. This requires the building of the Socialist Equality Party, the party of socialist revolution based on internationalist principles.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Aaron Edwards (AE): Where are you and your husband located?

Kate (K): We live out in Green Mountain, North Carolina. We are about 10 minutes from the Tennessee borderline. So our little part of the world got hit pretty hard.

AE: So the big city near you would be Asheville right?

K: Yeah. Asheville is about 55 minutes. Johnson City, Tennessee is about 45 minutes.

AE: How far is Boone, North Carolina, from you?

K: About half an hour. Boone is running like normal. We were worried about our son at Appalachian State in Boone because for the first five days we could not get in touch with anybody. We were so worried about him. People at the end of our road got a Starlink [satellite internet connection] and let us use it and we called him. It was five or six days after and he was just balling crying and like, relieved. We were more worried about him but from what we were hearing on the radio, downtown Boone was okay. I mean, everybody got hit but compared to most, downtown Boone was okay. But he lived in an area off campus in the New River apartments. Thank god they were on the second story. The first floor residents went and stayed with everybody upstairs. His place is now structurally unsound and he is in a hotel.

AE: What a mess.

K: Yeah. The tiniest little streams around here were roaring rapids. We are on the South Toe River. The gauge on the river has not worked for over a year. No one was able to report. We heard reports on all the other rivers. I think ours ended up 30 feet above. People that were up on hills on the side of the road, across the street from the river, their roofs were taken off. We were gridlocked back there for five, six days. And then we were going to try and hike out to the general store. It's like a nine minute drive, but it's all up mountain. Luckily our friends were coming around the corner at the same time that lived nearby to where we were hiking and caught us, so they were able to drive us up to the store. This is our 27th day of no power, no water, no cell service.

AE: You mentioned the radio. How were you able to listen to the radio? Is that how people were finding out what was going on?

K: That's all we had. Now things are definitely not normal but a lot of the cell service is starting to come back in places so we are able to get on social media but it is all hit or miss. Luckily when we bought our little crooked cabin in the woods, it came with a little radio that they left with

batteries. There were three stations we could get to listen to. Two were church stuff. The other, for something like two weeks, all they did was updates. There was no music. It was just people calling in, trying to locate other family members and finding out what roads were passable. But the majority of it was people calling in, looking for other people or people that were trapped in houses. Like, they would go ahead, put a number out there and people out here were checking on each other.

AE: Did you see any federal relief effort being done during that time?

K: Honestly, we were gridlocked for the first, like I said, almost like the first week we couldn't get out of our neighborhood. But it was more so the people here that have chainsaws and all that stuff. They cleared the roads, they had the sticks in the middle of the road holding up power poles or power lines so people could, like, we could just make our streets a little bit more passable. The majority of the work has been done by the people that live here. I mean, don't get me wrong, there are a ton of linemen out here but FEMA has been no help.

A couple of my friends got the whopping \$750, but I mean, me and my husband were only able to make it through a quarter of the online FEMA process and then our application just disappeared. What it's saying is we are not who we say we are. And to call FEMA, you're waiting on the phone for at least two hours plus to get hold of anybody, just to walk you through it. But FEMA's been limited from what I've seen. Other people say differently but we are a lot more rural so it is more so the churches and the people, the community itself, that has done the majority of the work.

AE: I just feel like the rest of us don't know anything. This is all news to me. The WSWS has been covering as much as we can and reporting on what's going on, but a lot of what has happened is still unknown.

K: The stories from people have been horrific. Watching people in houses screaming, going down the river. By the time you turn around to try and grab something to throw out to them ... gone. There are cars in trees that are 20 feet up in the air. They are still doing much more recovery now than rescue, but there are still a ton of people missing. As the river is receding, first responders did a wellness check on us and came up the street about, I don't know, a week and a half, two weeks later. And they are still doing swift river response. They were down there today again when we went to go leave the house to go to Walmart and grab some food. Still combing with dogs and everything, looking for bodies.

AE: What did the Walmart look like?

K: The first week they were closed. Now they are running as normal and fully stocked. The things that are hard to get are chainsaws, chainsaw blades, chains. Yeah, Walmart's pretty stocked. There's still a lot of places around here, especially the churches with free supplies, clothes, tons of water.

The biggest thing needed out here has been generators and gas and water. I mean here and Spruce Pine, where our friends live, the pipe system here is so old, it's terracotta pipes, so everything got destroyed. Spruce Pine, a majority of it all has power, but none of them have water. The job I work at in Spruce Pine, that's been washed away. So that's gone. People lost a lot of their businesses. I mean, their homes, their cars, their lives.

But from our point of view, we're lucky. I had a tree fall on my car. That was it. It dented a little bit of like the hood of the car. But if we didn't move our car when we did, both of our cars would have been crushed because that tree fell about 20 minutes after moving the car.

But I mean, we're extremely lucky compared to a lot of the people out here. We had a lot of trees down by us. Yeah, but I mean there was like one car when we finally made it out and we met our friend that day when we were trying to hike out to her. We were sitting there talking and we just couldn't believe this car up in a tree that looked like it went through one of those junkyard compressor things. You couldn't even tell it was a car, barely. And we were sitting there looking at it, just talking about it.

Come to find out they had just gotten the bodies out of the car. I think it was a husband, wife and a kid in the car. Just ... So, yeah, that car is still in the trees. So when we leave we have to look, I mean, I don't know how to say it without not sounding like ... but I mean, it's just a very grim reminder. Like, yeah, a lot of these cars had bodies in them.

AE: There's every indication that storms are going to intensify as the climate crisis and global climate change continue.

K: Exactly. I mean, they were calling this Biblical proportion. Like worst 500-year storm ever. It was worse than the one I guess that they had in 1916. And now they're saying, oh no, this was a thousand year storm.

As far as the body count [currently at 227] it is so far off what the news is showing. It's an extreme understatement. I'm sure they won't get the proper count for months to come because I guess the whole process, they have to get the body, identify the body, contact the family members, then write up the death certificate, some kind of form in that order. So until you actually have the death certificate, they can't count it as a dead body. But I guess it is hard to tell how true all this is because there's so much false information out on Facebook and everything, but from what I've heard, that's the situation.

The people that our son worked for don't live far from us, and they do North Carolina outdoor adventures. So they did all, like, the Whitewater rafting, tubing, climbing and all that. And they've been helping out. They pulled an easy hundred bodies out of the river in a six mile stretch. That's just by us.

AE: How do you plan to survive now that your job has been destroyed?

K: For full time, they're giving me \$169 a week to live off of for unemployment. That is not even a food grocery bill. I worked 40 hours a week! There's still churches, like I said, the supplies that we need and stuff, it's just tight. I mean, it's not like we could go out and spend the money anywhere because everything else has been destroyed or closed.

AE: How are you heating food?

K: We have a small generator. We run our generator about an hour and a half in the morning and an hour and a half at night just to run the refrigerator and charge our phones. But then we'll try to cook breakfast or lunch while we have the generator running, so we could use our microwave and a single induction burner. We just got chicken from Walmart. As far as dried canned goods and all that other stuff, a lot of the churches have food and bread and stuff that they'll hand out.

One thing I can say for sure, the people back here are so resilient and amazing. It's incredible. Like, just like, shirt off your back. Like anything you need.

AE: I hope that your town gets put back together.

K: Well, yeah, trust me, it's gonna be a long road, but like I said, the people back here are resilient and awesome, and, I mean, there's a reason they live in the mountains. It's cause they can hack it.



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