

Photo story: West Liberty, Kentucky virtually destroyed by storm

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The deadly wave of storms that struck the Midwest and southern United States on Friday, killing at least 39 people across five states, has left a trail of destruction in Kentucky. There have been 22 deaths reported in Kentucky as a result of the storms, with more than 300 injuries across the state. Governor Steve Beshear has declared a state of emergency and mobilized nearly 400 National Guard troops to assist in recovery efforts.

The tornadoes that tore through the state were the worst to hit Kentucky in almost a quarter century, with winds reaching up to 160 mph. Among the areas to suffer the worst damage and loss of life were the poor and rural communities in the Appalachian region of eastern Kentucky.

Friday's storms saw a natural disaster crashing headlong into a social crisis. Eastern Kentucky is one of the poorest areas in the country. It is home to 41 of Appalachia's 96 counties designated as economically distressed by the Appalachian Regional Commission. It is an area in which decaying social infrastructure, including inadequate severe weather warning systems and medical facilities, has left thousands of poor and working class people at the mercy of severe weather.

Many of the region's residents have lost everything in the storms. Homes and jobs have been destroyed. Storm victims are now left with the prospect of having to rebuild their lives when many were already having difficulty staying afloat financially.

In the town of East Bernstadt in Laurel County, five people were killed and 50 others were sent to area hospitals with head injuries, broken bones and lacerations. At least 100 homes were reduced to rubble.

In Menifee County, where four were killed, rescue workers reported difficulties in even reaching areas affected by the storms. Buddy Rogers, a spokesman for Kentucky Emergency Management, told reporters on

Friday evening, "We can't even get into some of these counties. The power is out, phones are out, roads are blocked and now it's dark, which complicates things."

One of the communities hit the hardest was West Liberty, where five people were killed. West Liberty is a small town located in the Appalachian foothills of Morgan County, near the Licking River. It has a population of 3,435 people, almost all of whom have been evacuated to Red Cross shelters in neighboring counties.

World Socialist Web Site reporters visited West Liberty on Saturday to survey the damage and interview those affected by the storm. (The accompanying slide show provides a sense of the devastation.)

Roadblocks set up by the Kentucky State Police and the National Guard prevented anyone but rescue workers and journalists from entering the town. Because of concerns over the structural integrity of West Liberty's remaining buildings, reporters were guided by police officers on a tour of the destruction downtown.

On one side of Main Street, storefronts had been caved in or had their windows broken out by trees and other debris blown into the center of town. Large sections of their roofs had been ripped away by the winds. On the other side of the street, buildings had been almost entirely flattened. Cars were crushed and overturned, thrown against the buildings.

Twisted pieces of metal had been wrapped around telephone poles or hung like clothespins on the city's power lines. Whole sections of neighborhoods had simply vanished, with only scattered pieces of wood and pink insulation material left behind. Nothing was left untouched by the storm.

Just outside of town, an elementary school had been

transformed into a Red Cross shelter. The school gymnasium was lined with cots. Basic supplies including water bottles and packages of paper towels were stacked on the bleachers.

Victims of Friday's tornadoes taking shelter at the school spoke with WSWS reporters about their experiences.

Teresa Eldridge, a mother of two children, ages four and seven, has lived in West Liberty all her life. She is 29 years old.

Teresa described what happened as a tornado ravaged the town on Friday. "We saw the tornado. We saw it. We live right next to the Rite-Aid. There is no way to describe it. We were watching the live Doppler radar on the computer. They said it looked like it was going towards Ezel [a town to the west of West Liberty]. Then, the lights went off. We looked out the window."

She elaborated on her reaction upon seeing the tornado and the sense of hopelessness that she now feels. "It looked like it was a mile wide. You could see stuff spinning in it. We ran to the bathroom and put the kids in the tub. We cried. The whole house started shaking. It was so loud. We went outside and there was just nothing left. West Liberty was gone. It was just gone. We felt like we didn't have a chance. We had just paid our rent early that morning. I want to go home so bad, I couldn't go to sleep last night."

Eldridge's thoughts were also with others in the town. "I just pray for everyone that didn't make it," she said.

Terisa Williams has lived in West Liberty for about a year. She worked for the Appalachian Regional Healthcare system in an office that was destroyed during the storm. She has not heard from her employer and she does not know if she still has a job.

"I was sitting on the couch. We were not even under a tornado watch, but as soon as my boyfriend said it was coming, the windows blew out," Williams said. "Stuff was flying around the house. Then, we ran to the basement."

She is left frightened for what the future holds for her and her family. "I am going to have to go to a friend's house to live. I don't know how we're going to get past this," Williams said.

Deborah Dulen said that she had heard there were supposed to be bad storms in the state, so she had also gone to pay her rent early in the morning.

She was under the impression that the tornado was going to miss West Liberty, as much of the news and weather warnings were focused on central Kentucky.

"All day I felt a sense of doom. But, we thought it was going to pass us by because the weatherman said so. Then I saw it out of the window. It was like black and gray smoke starting to swirl. My son-in-law came running in the back door. We ran into the bedroom, the whole house shook," Deborah recalled. "We no more than closed the bathroom door when we felt the whole house shake and heard windows breaking. After it was over, we went outside and West Liberty was gone. We really didn't feel like we had adequate warning."

She described the damage to her home. "The majority of the roof is gone," she said, "and three windows are broken. The tornado put a piece of plywood into our house and sliced our stairs in half. The deck caved in on our vehicles. We have no transportation."

Deborah stated that as of Saturday she has heard nothing about long-term government assistance. "They told us someone from the state was supposed to come down and help today," she said, "but no one came."

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