

Six dead as record-breaking Arctic air mass hits US Midwest

By Niles Niemuth
31 January 2019

A blast of historic cold temperatures hit the US Midwest, with record lows for both daily high and low temperatures expected Wednesday and Thursday across the region. Wind-chills in parts of northern Minnesota and North Dakota reached negative 60 degrees Fahrenheit (negative 51 Celsius) and even lower. The US Postal Service suspended mail deliveries in ten states Wednesday and Thursday out of concern for the safety of mail delivery personnel.

Two-thirds of the population in the continental United States, 212 million people, are expected to experience freezing temperatures before the end of the week. Approximately 83 million people, one-quarter of the US population, will experience temperatures well below zero degrees Fahrenheit, as the weather pattern known as the polar vortex makes its way east.

The onset of extraordinarily frigid temperatures has once again exposed the criminal failure of American capitalism, which is unable to maintain the social infrastructure required to withstand extreme weather events and puts the most vulnerable populations, including the elderly and homeless, at increased risk of injury or death.

School was called off for millions of students and many businesses were closed, with heating systems struggling and in many cases failing to overcome the frigid temperatures. Thousands of flights have been cancelled or delayed and Amtrak stopped all train service to and from Chicago.

On Wednesday night, Consumers Energy, one of the main energy providers in Michigan, sent out an emergency appeal to customers throughout the state to reduce their heat as much as possible to avoid a critical gas shortage. A fire Wednesday morning disabled one of the utility's facilities that accounts for 64 percent of its natural gas supply.

President Donald Trump, who has repeatedly denied the scientific reality of manmade climate change, used the onset of deadly cold weather as an opportunity to once again question the reality of global warming. "What the hell is going on with Global Warming [sic]? Please come back fast, we need you!" Trump flippantly tweeted Monday.

The North Polar Vortex is an extremely cold counterclockwise spinning mass of air which usually sits over the Arctic Sea, but as global warming has melted Arctic Sea ice and warming air makes its way into the Earth's northernmost regions, the vortex is disrupted, causing the cold air to split up and some of it to move further south. This process previously played out in 2014, when a mass of Arctic air drifted south, breaking temperature records across the US and causing the deaths of at least 21 people.

So far, at least six deaths have been attributed to this week's cold temperatures. This figure will undoubtedly increase significantly once it becomes possible for emergency responders and social workers to make a more detailed accounting.

A 22-year-old man in Rochester, Minnesota died of frostbite and hypothermia after he was locked out of his home early Sunday morning. The temperature in the city had fallen to -10 Fahrenheit, nearly 20 degrees below average. The body of a 55-year-old man was found frozen in his garage Tuesday in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, after he apparently collapsed while shoveling snow. Milwaukee's daily high of 7 degrees was more than 35 degrees below average. A 70-year-old man was found Wednesday frozen to death outside a neighbor's house in Detroit, where the high temperature barely reached -2 Fahrenheit.

In addition to increasing the risk of dying from exposure, the dramatic drop in temperatures has left

those living in substandard and older houses at an increased risk of losing their homes or lives in a fire, as many rely on faulty space heaters and other cheap but dangerous forms of heating to keep warm. More than 2,000 people die every year across the US in residential fires, with faulty heaters a significant factor in these disasters.

A mother and her three children were killed Wednesday morning as a fire engulfed their home in Akron, Ohio. A 16-year-old and a 24-year-old man were killed in a house fire on Chicago's southside after they were trapped in an attic by the blaze. A 12-year-old child died after a heat lamp likely sparked a fire in a Pulaski County, Kentucky home. And in Fort Wayne, Indiana, a family was displaced from their home when a fire was sparked after multiple space heaters overloaded the building's electrical system.

Power and gas outages were reported from Minnesota to New Jersey, leaving thousands without heat in their homes for hours at time as utility workers worked to restore services in sub-zero temperatures, which officials warned could result in frostbite after even a few minutes of exposure. More than 5,000 people in the Twin Cities were without power Tuesday night, as the temperature fell to -25 degrees Fahrenheit.

Homeless shelters were filled to more than capacity in Omaha, Nebraska. At the Open Door Mission, which has 917 beds available for homeless men on any given night, dozens were forced to sleep on the floor after every bed was filled. "We don't turn people away," CEO Candace Gregory told KETV News, "We just don't want any deaths. Because this weather is life or death for those that we serve." In addition to providing meals for the homeless, Open Door reported that it served 100 hot lunches to children who were left without a meal after the city's schools closed for the day.

Such conditions were repeated across the country as warming centers, homeless shelters and soup kitchens filled to over capacity from major urban centers like Chicago and Detroit to smaller cities like Reading, Pennsylvania and Lexington, Kentucky. Officials in Chicago struggled to provide shelter for the city's homeless population, estimated at some 80,000 people, temporarily adding a mere 500 beds to the city's shelter system this week. In Lexington 723 people sought shelter Tuesday night, including in freight

trailers modified into sleeping quarters.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>