

Killer heat waves: Workers need action now

written by Sharon Black
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24-day march from Delano to Gov. Gavin Newsom's Sacramento office aims to gain the governor's signature on a proposed California labor law. Photo: David Bacon

While tornadoes, hurricanes, and floods grab headlines, extreme heat is the top weather-related killer, says FEMA.

FEMA reports do not capture the dangers that have escalated. Already, before the summer is in full swing, killer heat waves have hit not only the South and Midwest but also the Northeastern part of the country.

Beyond this, heat waves pose a significant threat to the Global South, where billions of people live and are forced to cope with fewer resources. Ironically, the capitalist West, which bears the brunt of the blame for the climate crisis, has robbed the most oppressed globally, making it harder for poorer countries to respond. The murderous U.S. war machine compounds all of this.

The World Health Organization estimates heat waves caused more than 166,000 deaths globally between 1998 and 2017.

In the U.S., the victims of this crisis are mainly workers toiling in the fields or construction sites or broiling in uncooled warehouses and other sweatshops. The poorest are at risk, including the unhoused, especially those cramped in urban areas. The most impacted are Black, Brown, Indigenous, and poor people.

Willy Blackmore, a Brooklyn freelance writer who covers environmental issues, describes how the burden of the climate crisis impacts the Black community in [How Much Worse Was the Last Heatwave Due to Climate Change](#).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that "Indigenous peoples had the highest rates of heat-related death, followed by Black populations."

Response pitiful or, worse, criminal

Not surprisingly, Florida's Gov. Ron DeSantis signed Florida House Bill 433, which prohibits local governments from requiring shade or water breaks for outdoor workers.

Texas, not wanting to be outdone by DeSantis, approved a bill that stripped cities of their authority to enforce local regulations. Austin and Dallas, for example, required employers to give 10-minute rest breaks for construction workers every four hours.

The United Farm Workers have been pressing OSHA to implement a national heat stress standard. The union supports a bill called the "Asuncion Valdivia Heat Illness and Fatality Prevention Act," named after a 53-year-old farm worker who collapsed from heat stroke after working a 10-hour day picking grapes in 100-degree sun.

Biden promised to add heat safety rules to OSHA in 2021, but nothing has happened.

The fact is that the Biden administration and the President have the power to enact emergency measures to protect every vulnerable human being — from babies and young children to older people and those with health challenges — all working and poor people, whether in rural or urban areas.

No worker needs to die because they aren't given adequate breaks, shade, and water, whether they toil in the fields or work in Bezo's warehouse sweatshops. No child or retired person cramped in a small apartment in the heart of so many concrete U.S. cities should boil to death, nor should those in neglected rural areas. The unhoused and those herded into jails and prisons, as well as those with health problems, both physical and mental, must be protected. Death disparity for Indigenous, Black, Brown, and people of color must end.

It is time to organize to fight for emergency action; the trillions spent on the U.S. imperialist war machine, including the horrific genocide in Gaza, must be spent to save lives here and abroad.

