

How the Turkish earthquake disaster was prepared

25 August 1999

Dear editor,

I want to applaud your coverage of the earthquake in Turkey.

The articles by Shannon Jones <http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/aug1999/turk-a19.shtml> and by Justus Leicht <http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/aug1999/turk-a20.shtml> are thoughtful and well-written. I wish to emphasize this point: while the disaster is "natural," the bloody consequences are entirely due to the way that capitalism has developed in Turkey over the past 30 to 30 years.

Turkey used to be a predominantly small farm, peasant economy. As late as 30 years ago three-quarters of the population lived in rural areas, in small villages, scratching out a living off their family farms. Today the reverse is the case: three-quarters of the population live in the cities and urban centers, industry has developed, large factory towns have mushroomed especially in the northwestern part of the country. Istanbul's population, for example, has grown to 7 million. Such quick development of Turkish industry was due to its full integration into the European and world market, to its geographical location at the crossroads of Europe, Asia and Africa. Multinational corporations and banks played an extremely important role in this development, attracted by the location and the low wages prevailing there.

The growth of industry in Turkey was speeded up and encouraged by neglecting the major needs of the population for decent housing, sanitation, education and a clean environment. The employers could count on the desperate need of Turkish masses for work at any wage to fill out their labor force requirement. The average per capita income in Turkey is less than \$2,500, which certainly cannot secure decent apartments, decent schools and hospitals, and all the

other things people need. Yet, the regime knows that raising wage levels and living standards would undermine the competitiveness of Turkey as the industrial location for multinational firms.

The reports coming in tell us that, unlike in the populated areas, and with the single exception of the Yarimca oil refinery, the earthquake damage to the various industrial factories is small. The *Financial Times* of August 19 writes that "Lafarge, the French building materials group, has three sites near the epicenter. At the moment it appears there are no serious injuries or damage". On August 23 the *FT* wrote: "Commercial activities are beginning to return to normal. After blazing for five days in the tank farm, the fire in Turkey's biggest refinery on Izmit Bay has been brought under control. The Istanbul Stock Exchange will reopen tomorrow."

This should not surprise us. Multinational industrial firms build their factories to survive the regularly occurring Turkish earthquakes. After all, this is part of doing business. They would not ship expensive equipment to a site which was in danger of collapsing next month or next year. Workers, oh that is a different story. Unskilled or semi-skilled workers are a dime a dozen.

Even more telling are the reports from the insurance industry. The *Financial Times* on August 19 quoted Gungor Uras, the chairman of one leading Turkish insurance company. He estimated the business claims (remember, businesses suffered relatively little) to reach \$2 billion. But because home and life insurance are virtually unknown in Turkey, "claims by civilians would not exceed \$50 million."

I heard an interview with some Turkish government minister who exclaimed that while the property damage can be made good, the loss of human lives is a huge blow to the country. Such sentimental phrases are

nothing but a cover for the corrupt politicians. Under Turkish capitalism businesses are worth billions, people—next to nothing.

FK



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