

Thousands evacuated following floods in Quebec and Ontario

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Almost 2,000 people have been evacuated from their homes this week following intense floods that hit more than 170 municipalities, mainly in Quebec, but also in Ontario and in New Brunswick. About 3,000 homes have been flooded across Quebec, from the border of Ontario to the Gaspé Peninsula.

Ten cities have declared a state of emergency, including Montreal, and have extended it for five days in the most affected boroughs and kept a number of schools, roads and bridges closed. While authorities said the situation is now stabilized in the lakes and tributaries of the St. Lawrence River, water levels remain extremely high and the extent of the damage will be revealed only when the floodwaters fully recede. Government officials admitted that it would take weeks if not months before affected people's lives return to normal.

A naval frigate was sent to the port of Trois-Rivières to assist with the construction of flood defences, as more heavy rain is anticipated over the coming days.

The flooding has been linked to at least one death, that of Mike Gagnon, a 37-year-old man from Gaspé region whose car was swept into the water by a strong current on Monday. A two-year-old girl who was also in the car has not yet been found.

Meteorologists and experts all agree that the latest floods are the result of unusually persistent rainfall, melting snow, and global warming. Normally in April the rainfall average is around 80 millimetres, but this year twice that amount fell in Quebec. The first week of May alone saw the quantity of rain that would usually fall during the entire month. This comes on top of all the melting snow from March snowstorms that hit eastern Ontario and western Quebec.

A Concordia University professor and climatologist, Jeannine St-Jacques, explained that with climate

change, not only Canada but the entire globe will see more of such phenomena. "We have what we call 100-year floods and 1,000-year floods," said St-Jacques. "It's the sort of the worst flood you'd expect in 100 years. In a lot of places worldwide, we're exceeding our 100-year floods, our 1,000-year floods, our 2,000-year floods. As things become more extreme, we will be seeing more."

The floods in Quebec have exposed the gap between the courage and generosity of ordinary people and the utter indifference and hypocrisy of the ruling class. The Federal government deployed about 2,250 members of the Canadian Armed Forces to assist overwhelmed responders, but flooded residents are largely left alone, forced to rely on themselves, neighbours, volunteers and the Red Cross.

The provincial government announced it would contribute \$500,000 to a relief fund, while the City of Montreal is to give \$250,000 and the City of Laval, \$50,000. This is a drop in the ocean, however, considering the extent of the damage.

This is in addition to the fact that many flooded people, impacted both economically and psychologically, could lose their houses and personal belongings. Insurance experts explained that most people (about 90 percent) are not covered for floods in Quebec. Following the 2013 floods in Toronto and Alberta, insurance companies created a new insurance product in relation to floods, which they see as a new source of profit. Individuals have to buy the product separately, but are apparently often not informed of its existence.

The media has published interviews with people affected by the floods who expressed strong criticism of the insufficient aid provided by provincial as well as local and federal governments. While abnormal levels

of water have been observed for weeks in certain regions, the federal government only intervened when the situation got out of control and hundreds of houses were flooded.

Montreal's West Island residents explained they have been requesting sandbags for weeks to protect their homes from rising floods, but they came too late. Those who received sandbags had to fill them all themselves.

CBC reported on Raymond Stelmashuk, who had to fill 600 sandbags during a sleepless week to try to save his 93-year-old grandmother's house, but to no avail. "There's not a city person around, nobody's around. They keep coming and going, but they're not helping anybody," he said, adding, "this shouldn't be happening and the city should be way more organized."

Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made their *pro forma* visits to flooded areas and helped fill sandbags before the cameras. As always, such hypocritical gestures only serve to cover the fact that the extent of the catastrophe is in large part due to government policies.

Concordia professor St-Jacques declared that budget cuts were an important cause behind the extent of the flood damage. "In the early 2000s, a lot of watershed management got delegated down to municipalities, and municipalities just don't have the expertise—they're not set up to deal with it," she explained.

This occurred during the massive budget and tax cuts made by the federal Chrétien-Martin Liberal government and the Parti Québécois provincial government of Lucien Bouchard in the 1990s. These cuts, which were in response to growing demands by big business for a massive redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top, have created a deep public health crisis, and also affected transport, health care and infrastructure.

This has had consequences not only in Quebec. Last year, residents of Fort McMurray, Alberta, were largely left to fend for themselves as a wildfire raged through the city. The disaster, which was entirely predictable due to the effects of climate change, was exacerbated by the disorganized and inadequate preparations and responses by the federal Liberal and provincial New Democratic Party government.

While the media gave widespread coverage to the Fort McMurray fire, as it is now doing for the floods in Quebec and Ontario, this will rapidly subside. The

empty promises of politicians will never materialize and the governments will pursue their agenda of spending cuts to fund wars abroad and the enrichment of the ruling elite at home.

The extent of the flood damage and the inaction of governments at all levels have once again exposed the bankruptcy of capitalism, a system based on private profits and the domination of a thin layer of super-rich over every aspect of social life.

While heavy rains result from natural forces, the catastrophe in Quebec, predictable as it was, could have been prevented, and hundreds of people would still have their homes today.

What is currently and immediately needed in Quebec, Ontario and in other flooded regions across the country are billions of dollars and the mobilization of all available resources to help people affected by the flood as part of a massive program of infrastructure investment.

But such efforts are incompatible with the capitalist profit system, which seeks at every level to slash public spending for social services so as to boost the profits of the corporations and the financial elite. A planned response to the floods in Ontario and Quebec, and to other natural disasters around the world, is conceivable only as part of a socialist program which places the social needs of the vast majority above the profit interests of the super-rich.

The author also recommends:

Canadian capitalism and the Fort McMurray wildfire
[10 May 2016]



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