

Death toll rises in Mexico City earthquake

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At least 225 people are dead after a 7.1 magnitude earthquake hit Mexico City and nine other states Tuesday afternoon. Initial reports indicate that 44 buildings have collapsed in the country's capital, leaving 699 wounded and 201 people missing. This social catastrophe comes on the anniversary of the devastating 1985 Mexico City earthquake and just two weeks after an 8.1 magnitude quake struck the impoverished south of the country.

The location of the earthquake's epicenter prevented the city's monitoring system from warning residents of the impending danger until after the earthquake had begun, preventing many from evacuating on time. Millions of residents had finished the annual safety drill commemorating the 1985 earthquake—which killed at least 10,000 people—just a few hours before the start of the new disaster.

Over 40 percent of Mexico City and 60 percent of the state of Morelos did not have access to electricity on Wednesday afternoon, while Mexico City's metro, the second largest system in North America, operated with extremely reduced services on Tuesday, with four out of the city's 14 lines shut down. Schools and major universities canceled classes in Mexico City and in the states of Mexico, Guerrero, Hidalgo, Morelos, Puebla, Veracruz, and Tlaxcala until further notice, leaving 14 million students out of school. Over 15,000 people were relocated from the historic center of Puebla to the city's exhibition hall out of fear of further building collapses.

In Mexico City, devastation was concentrated in the city's center. The most affected structures were located in the municipalities of Cuauhtémoc, Benito Juárez, Coyoacán and Iztapalapa.

Twenty-one children died after two schools collapsed, and there were still two children and one adult trapped under one of the school's debris as of Wednesday afternoon. There have been 17 aftershocks of the

earthquake to date, with the most powerful having a magnitude of 4.9. A seismologist with the United States Geological Survey noted that the most recent tremor may have been an aftershock of the quake that struck the coast of Mexico on September 7.

Due to massive social anger, the government was compelled to install advanced earthquake monitoring systems and more closely enforce the city's building codes after the city's catastrophic losses in 1985. However, mass poverty and extreme inequality, as well as a policy of austerity by the ruling elite, ensure that millions are still condemned to live and work under life-threatening conditions.

Mexico City sits on one of the world's most seismically active areas. The city of over 21 million is also built on a dried-out lakebed, making it susceptible to earthquake damage. There have been 34 earthquakes with a magnitude greater than 7 within 300 miles of Tuesday's earthquake since 1900. As such, earthquakes are neither unforeseen nor unanticipated events. Construction methods that can help make old and historic buildings safe are well known.

The failure to make structures safe is not an accident, but is a function of the capitalist profit system, which presides over the massive enrichment of an increasingly thin layer of society, while condemning millions to die of preventable disasters. As with many other major metropolitan areas, Mexico City simultaneously houses extreme luxury alongside conditions fitting another century. Over 28 percent of Mexico City's population lived in poverty in 2016, while the city also housed over 102,000 millionaires in 2013.

Spending on social services has been slashed to fill the pockets of transnational corporations and to arm the military in preparation for future social unrest. Public infrastructure funding was reduced by over 20 percent in July of this year compared to the same period in 2016. Meanwhile, capital expenses for the public

sector—including spending on new infrastructure, new machinery, and maintenance—fell by over 40 percent during the first five months of this year compared to the same period last year, according to the Mexican Secretariat of Finance and Public Credit.

This is the sharpest cut to capital public sector spending since 1990. Under the government of Peña Nieto, the military's budget has increased by 36 percent, and has nearly doubled since 2006 alone.

The United States Geological Survey predicts that the cost of the earthquake will be in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

The ruling elite is in no doubt nervous about the explosive anger that could erupt over this policy of social murder. The 1985 earthquake and the government's anemic response marked the end of the PRI's rule in Mexico City, and there is evidence of growing anger against the Peña Nieto administration in response to the quake. Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong, the government's Secretary of the Interior, was booed, insulted and physically assaulted by volunteers when he visited an active rescue area near a collapsed factory on Wednesday. Although soldiers surrounded the official to allow him to pass, Osorio Chong was quickly forced to leave the area. Earlier this year, Osorio Chong was considered a potential candidate in next year's presidential election.

In direct contrast with the response of the ruling elite, it has been the working class that has directed rescue efforts through its self-sacrifice and class solidarity. Thousands of workers spontaneously mobilized throughout the city, taking to the streets to rescue those trapped under the rubble. Scenes of organized crowds digging through debris were repeated at nearly every site of a collapsed building. Despite the threat of aftershocks, volunteers remained in rescue areas throughout Tuesday night and Wednesday morning.

Workers formed massive assembly lines to pass debris, buckets, shovels, pick axes, food, water, and medical equipment to and from the collapsed buildings. Volunteers created cardboard signs that indicated when the crowd should be silent to let volunteers hear the muffled cries of those trapped. Due to congestion in the public transportation system, workers volunteered their personal vehicles to take others to their destinations, while many stood at intersections to direct traffic and to facilitate the movement of emergency vehicles.

Hundreds of others distributed food and water to those in need.

It is the working class that should be in charge of organizing not only rescue efforts, but the entire economy. As has been sharply on display during the hurricanes that have devastated the Caribbean, the United States and Mexico, it is the working class that suffers the most from these disasters and that is the only class capable of successfully mobilizing against them by relying on its own social strength. Workers must fight to bring order to the chaos of the capitalist system and to reorganize the world economy to guarantee their own social rights. This can only be done as a struggle for international socialism in Mexico and around the world.



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