

French flooding deaths expose legacy of austerity

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Last week, on October 14-15, heavy rains triggered two days of flooding that devastated the Aude region of southern France. Fourteen people were killed, 75 were injured and there was enormous damage. A total of 126 municipalities have been declared natural disaster sites in an 80 kilometer perimeter stretching from the north of Carcassonne to the mouth of the Aude river.

In the city of Villegailhenc, one of the most badly damaged, three people lost their lives. The mayor said, “More than half of our households have lost everything. In nearly two of every three houses there is nothing left on the ground floor.”

This catastrophe has struck a region that is already poor and neglected. It is principally rural and lives off of tourism, winegrowing and fishing, all of which were hard hit by the 2008 financial crash. The unemployment rate rose to 17 percent in 2015. Average household income, at €20,523, is 20.8 percent less than the national average.

Fifteen hundred houses have lost electricity, 10,000 are without running water, four road bridges have been destroyed and two more have been badly damaged. The recently built hospital in Carcassonne was also hit, and four villages were evacuated due to concerns over the stability of a dam. The vineyards in an 80 kilometer radius around the Aude were damaged or completely carried off by the floodwaters.

There are also concerns over the effect of the flooding on a nuclear site at Malvési run by Orano (formerly known as Areva), which stores nearly 1 million cubic meters of radioactive water in the open air.

This is the worst flood of the Aude river, one of the rivers of southern France known for its violent autumn flooding, since 1891. The lack of preparation for the flooding has exposed again the terrible consequences of the austerity policies imposed by the European Union

and French President Emmanuel Macron’s bitterly unpopular government.

Already in 1999, a major storm over the Aude region and the Mediterranean Sea came together to cause 31 deaths and €535 million in damage to the region. At the time, the Socialist Party (PS) government of Lionel Jospin responded by declaring that it would launch an “overall plan” for substantial improvements in national and local prevention, awareness and management of storms and floods.

In 2010, the Aude police prefecture declared in a flyer that the lessons of the 1999 floods had been learned with the setting up of various mechanisms, including “813 prevention plans for flood risks, 191 communal safety plans, 9 action plans to prevent flooding, and 3 flood prevention services.” It concluded: “1999-2009 were ten years of improvement of the regulatory framework. The state is organizing the saving of lives and the protection property.”

This has been flatly contradicted by the experience of the population of the Aude region, which has made known its anger at the lack of preparedness.

The red alert that the Météo-France weather service was supposed to give to warn residents to seek shelter was launched only at 6 a.m., by which point the equivalent of three months of rain had already fallen and the region’s population had been forced to flee their flooded homes.

There were not enough firemen in the region to deal with the crisis: 350 firemen had to come from nearby regions—approximately the same number as those available in the Aude region. Firemen from nearby regions were, however, available to intervene only after the flooding.

Flood victims were forced to wait hours for water in emergency shelters set up by the municipalities and

even longer for food. The media were left to applaud local initiatives and the intervention of charities such as the Red Cross in an effort to cover up the state's failure to provide adequate supplies.

Reports by France Stratégie, a government agency, and by the French Senate pointed last year to the lack of resources at Météo France, highlighting the role of budget cuts since 2014, cuts to state funding after 2012, the decision to not hire replacements for 20 percent of staff as they retired, and the danger of "meteorological deserts," where no precise observations can be made due to facility closures.

The Aude's inhabitants made their views clear to Prime Minister Edouard Philippe when he visited the area in what the daily *L'Indépendant* euphemistically called "a climate of incomprehension." In the city of Trèbes, he was denounced by one resident, who told him: "I have lost animals, and people are dead. Everyone knew Storm Leslie was coming, that rain was coming from the Mediterranean. L'Aude is not a peaceful river. But nothing was said or done."

Philippe tried to defend himself by claiming that the event was unpredictable, whereas in fact the plans of the local administration are intended precisely to deal with such "exceptional" events.

Many commentators posted angry remarks on the prime minister's Twitter feed, mocking a picture of Philippe helping an older lady leave her home: "And the photographer appeared there purely by chance, of course," "What a shameful set-up," and "I screwed her pension, but I am so compassionate."

As in other natural disasters aggravated by budget cuts, the worst hit are the poorest and those with the least resources. Those who lost their lives in this disaster, who were injured or who lost everything are, in the final analysis, the victims of the explosive rise of social inequality in France.

Endless European Union austerity measures carried out by successive governments of all political stripes, of the right and of PS, have left behind public services that are bled white and a crumbling infrastructure. At the same time, hundreds of billions of euros are being funneled to the military and the super-rich, with billionaire Bernard Arnault increasing his capital by €22 billion over the last year alone.

This plundering of resources vital to meet the most urgent requirements of the population, while workers

are constantly told to make sacrifices for austerity, has left critical services under-funded and understaffed.

Moreover, it is well known that with global warming such "exceptional" meteorological events are expected to become far more frequent. To avoid even worse catastrophes in the future, it is critical to seize and place at the disposal of society the enormous social resources that are squandered on the European financial aristocracy.



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