Scientist warns Istanbul earthquake could kill hundreds of thousands

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Speaking to the daily *Cumhuriyet* on June 29, well-known geologist Professor Naci Görü warned that no preparations are being made for an expected earthquake of magnitude at least 7.2 in Istanbul that could kill hundreds of thousands. Earthquake experts internationally agree that an earthquake of at least magnitude 7 is likely in the next 10 years in Istanbul.

Asked "What would Istanbul look like if there was an earthquake with a minimum magnitude of 7.2," Görü criticised the local government of Istanbul led by Ekrem ?mamo?lu (Republican People's Party, CHP). He said, "That's our concern. For example, there is an earthquake report published by IBB [Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality]. If it were me, I would not have published it. … It must have been made by our very optimistic friends."

The IBB report clamed there would be 14,000 deaths after a 7.2-magnitude earthquake in Istanbul.

"This is not true," Görü stated bluntly, describing the dangerous situation facing millions of working people in Istanbul: "A simple account: there are 1.6 million buildings. Let's reduce all mortal cases to 1 percent in Istanbul. This means 16,000 buildings. Suppose that each building has four floors. It means 64,000 floors. If we think two apartments on each floor, it means 128,000 apartments. Put four people in each apartment, does it exceed 400,000 [deaths]?"

Blaming successive central and local governments for the neglect of earthquake risks not only in Istanbul but across Turkey, he said: "This government was not the only one responsible for the failure to take action regarding the earthquake; so were the previous ones."

He criticised massive government construction projects like the Istanbul Canal, Istanbul Airport, highways, and bridges, built in the interests of the big business, for blocking necessary measures against earthquake risks. He said, "Neither canal projects nor airport projects, nor bridge or road projects are more important than this country's massive death toll in an earthquake."

In conclusion, he asserted that if the authorities took the measures recommended by scientists, a massive death toll could be prevented. He said: "Ask the scientists, if you do the things they draw attention to, you cannot stop the earthquake, but you will reduce the damage. Perhaps you will reduce it to 100 deaths, instead of losing 10,000 lives. … So is not this the biggest project? Why don't you do it, what are you waiting for?"

Three months before the earthquake in the eastern Turkish city of Elaz?? in January, Görü had warned of the earthquake risk in the area, calling for immediate action. A 6.8 magnitude earthquake on January 24 left 41 dead and more than 1,600 injured.

Turkey is an earthquake-prone country, many of whose cities are built on active faults, and has a disastrous earthquake record. Last month, there were several earthquakes of magnitude between 4 and 5.5 across Turkey. In the 1999 Marmara earthquake, official reports said about 18,000 people lost their lives and more than 25,000 were injured. Some unofficial reports estimate that the real death toll was 50,000 and there were 100,000 injured. A 2011 earthquake in the eastern province of Van left more than 600 dead and nearly 4,200 injured.

All the research carried out especially after the 1999 earthquake show that the anticipated earthquake on the North Anatolian Fault Line will likely be at least magnitude 7.2 in the Marmara Sea, off Istanbul. This would cause a disaster not only in Turkey's biggest city, but also in neighboring industrial cities such as Kocaeli, Bursa and Tekirda?.

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Nonetheless, the ruling class and governments from all establishment parties have done nothing against this coming disaster in Istanbul, where 16 million people live, or almost 20 percent of the Turkish population. Instead of preparing for a massive earthquake that scientists have warned about for years, social resources have been transferred to the capitalist class. In fact, the death toll from the next massive earthquake in Istanbul could be a product of not a natural catastrophe but a social crime committed by the Turkish ruling class.

President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an's government undoubtedly bears the main responsibility for this great destruction and death danger facing millions of workers. Not only was Erdo?an president since 2002, but he was mayor of Istanbul from 1994 to 1999. Until the 2019 local elections, Istanbul has been governed by Erdo?an's Justice and Development Party (AKP).

In all these years, while national and local authorities changed construction plans for Istanbul to allow real estate companies to build massive building and gain billions, nothing was done in preparation for the earthquake. In 2011, Turkey's finance minister said the government had spent earthquake taxes (about 46-48 billion Turkish liras) collected since 1999 on double highways, health care and education, not on preparing for earthquakes.

However, Istanbul Mayor Ekrem ?mamo?lu—who was supported by the far-right Good Party, the Kurdish-nationalist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and numerous pseudo-left groups in the March 2019 local elections as an "alternative" to the AKP—does not have a different earthquake policy from his predecessor.

Instead of performing concrete work like the urgent renovation of buildings in working class neighborhoods, ?mamo?lu focused on determining gathering areas for the population and how to do initial damage analysis immediately after an earthquake.

For years and especially in Istanbul, "urban transformation" campaigns have been a way to drive working class residents from the city centre and build luxury residences for the affluent. The purpose is not to protect residents from earthquakes, but to boost profits for construction firms and enrich the wealthiest layers of society.

Due to this irrationality of the capitalism, thousands of new, earthquake-resistant apartments remain empty in Istanbul and other cities, while hundreds of thousands of people live in old buildings that are death traps and will likely collapse in a future earthquake.

Natural disasters, hurricanes, floods and earthquakes worldwide, and global pandemics such as COVID-19 have mainly hit the working class, which constitutes the vast majority of society, and poor sections of the middle classes, due to their miserable living conditions. On the other hand, a tiny privileged elite of billionaires and multimillionaires wallow in wealth and live in castle-like houses.

The ongoing COVID-19 outbreak has clearly demonstrated that defending humanity against natural disasters, climate change and the pandemic threat requires a level of planning and global cooperation that capitalism can never achieve.

A massive plan of public works is necessary to reconstruct cities across the world threatened by natural disasters, such as Istanbul, based on scientific planning and the highest level of security, to provide everyone with the fundamental right to safe housing. The implementation of this solution requires the conscious struggle to transfer political power to the working class—a struggle for international socialism, based on planning global economic life based on social needs, not private profit.

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