

Death toll rises to 87 after earthquake in Aegean Sea

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The death toll has risen to 87 after a 6.9-magnitude earthquake near the Greek island of Samos in the Aegean Sea hit both the city of Izmir in western Turkey and Samos in Greece on Friday. There were 85 deaths and nearly 1,000 wounded in Turkey, while two people lost their lives and about 20 were injured in Greece after the earthquake also caused a small-scale tsunami near Izmir. This loss of life was preventable and the result of a social crime.

While the Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) claims the quake's magnitude was 6.6, the United States Geological Survey measured it as 7.0. At least 17 buildings completely collapsed in Izmir, a city of 4.3 million people, and search and rescue work is continuing.

Many buildings and roads were damaged in Samos, which is 16 kilometres from the centre of the earthquake. A large part of the island's Virgin Mary church collapsed. Aftershocks approaching 5 in magnitude continue across the region. Izmir residents therefore could not enter their homes and spent the night in tents set up in the streets and parks.

Moreover, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has only aggravated the plight facing thousands of people in Izmir. Izmir Governor Yavuz Selim Köşger announced on October 25 that the number of cases in the city had doubled in the previous 10 days, killing 15 in just two days. The Turkish Medical Association stated that widespread coronavirus testing should be urgently planned and performed in the affected area.

Turkish and Greek officials, who have pursued a dangerous military confrontation in the eastern Mediterranean over oil and gas resources, threatening to spark a regional war, made hypocritical statements of "solidarity" after the earthquake.

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis called

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan after the earthquake and wrote on Twitter: "Whatever our differences, these are times when our people need to stand together." Erdoğan responded, saying: "Turkey, too, is always ready to help Greece heal its wounds."

After the destruction in Izmir, search and rescue personnel have been joined by working people who have mobilized in solidarity with the earthquake victims. Miners from Soma travelled to Izmir to participate in search and rescue work. This came after they tried to march to Ankara to demand back wages and other benefits owed for years, only to be blocked and attacked by police and gendarmerie forces.

Erdoğan said in Izmir that all the needs of the citizens whose homes were damaged will be met and that new ones will be built by the state. Some of his ministers also spoke, climbing atop wrecked buildings where search and rescue work was still being carried out, pledging aid to earthquake victims. With this, all are trying to hide the government's crime of negligence on earthquake preparedness since it took power in 2002.

Turkey is an earthquake-prone country, sitting atop two major fault lines as well as fault lines in the Aegean Sea. Scientists have repeatedly called on the government and local administrations to take due precautions, especially after a horrific earthquake in 1999 in the Marmara region killed more than 17,000 and left nearly 250,000 homeless, according to official figures.

There are no serious preparations, however, either for Istanbul or cities in the rest of Turkey. The government has no plan besides calling on people to stay calm. Inevitably, the working class pays the heaviest toll in lives when cheap, vulnerable housing and buildings collapse.

In January, an earthquake of 6.8-magnitude

devastated the eastern city of Elazığ: more than 40 died and thousands were injured as a result of this long-anticipated quake.

For decades, Ankara and local governments have made almost no investment in social infrastructure, such as renovating flimsy buildings, planning settlements based on earthquake risk, and preparing for post-earthquake recovery and treatment.

In 2011, Erdoğan's then-finance minister was asked to account for 46–48 billion Turkish liras (US\$8.1 billion) in earthquake taxes collected since 1999. He said the government spent it on double highways, health care and education instead of earthquake preparedness. Erdoğan himself declared in January: “We spent it where it should be spent.”

Bourgeois opposition parties, especially the Republican People's Party (CHP) that controls city of İzmir, followed the same policies in the municipalities they govern. Throughout this period, local authorities changed cities' development plans so that construction companies built huge buildings and made billions, but did nothing for earthquake preparedness.

When it emerged that some of the collapsed buildings were already reported to be rotten, the government and the CHP-led local administration blamed each other for earthquake deaths. In fact, the national government and the municipalities have all turned a blind eye to unplanned and uncontrolled construction for decades. This is the principal reason for the loss of life and property in earthquakes.

In particular, an earthquake disaster is approaching in Istanbul, which is home to nearly 16 million people, or almost 20 percent of the Turkish population. Many scientists and experts warn that an expected earthquake of at least 7.2 magnitude in Istanbul could kill hundreds of thousands. Nonetheless, neither the government nor the CHP-led municipal administration has taken any serious measures.

Natural disasters, hurricanes, floods and earthquakes worldwide, and global pandemics such as COVID-19, mainly hit the working class, which constitutes the vast majority of society, along with poorer sections of the middle classes. On the other hand, a tiny privileged elite of billionaires and multimillionaires wallow in wealth and live in castle-like homes.

Prof. Övgün Ahmet, a seismologist, underscored this after the earthquake near İzmir, stating: “The higher the

poverty, the closer the earthquake is to you. You have not heard, and you will not hear, about rich people being pulled from the wreckage. The main problem is poverty.”

The preventable deaths and destruction after the earthquake in the Aegean Sea have made clear once again that capitalism and establishment parties that defend it are the major obstacle to building a world in which masses of people can live without fear of the impact of natural disasters.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained previously, a massive plan of public works is an immediate necessity to reconstruct cities across the world threatened by natural disasters based on scientific planning and the highest level of security, to provide everyone with the fundamental right to safe housing. This requires a struggle to transfer political power to the working class—a struggle for international socialism, based on planning global economic life.



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