

“We cannot possibly drown in our own schools!”

# Floods in Greece expose the fatal consequences of climate change and austerity policies

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Heavy rains led to devastating floods across Greece in mid-October. Based on the number of emergency calls, the fire brigade estimates that almost 2,000 houses were flooded across the country during the storm named “Ballos.” Most affected was the Attica region and the Greek capital, Athens.

The flood of water turned streets into rivers, swept away hundreds of cars and caused power cuts in several districts. Areas of the island of Euboea were also affected, where catastrophic fires had raged in the summer. A 70-year-old farmer died in the floods on the island. Last weekend, following heavy rainfall, flooding occurred again on the island of Corfu, with houses, shops and fields inundated in a number of villages.

Despite previous warnings from scientists, the government did nothing to protect the population from the floods. Instead, it reacted with the same criminal negligence and ignorance it has shown with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic and the country’s recent forest fires. The aftermath of the storm once again revealed the glaring deficiencies in flood and disaster protection and the widespread unsafe and cramped construction and dilapidated infrastructure which prevails in Greece—a result of decades of austerity policies.

On social media, scenes from the northern Athens district of Nea Philadelphia shocked viewers. A video shows students rescuing themselves from their flooded school via a makeshift bridge of desks and chairs. The images were reminiscent of natural disasters in developing countries. “Welcome to the Middle Ages or Greece 2021,” commented one Twitter user.

Many tweets linked the school flooding to the government’s recent attacks on public education, which led to tens of thousands of teachers and students going on strike just days before the storm.

The affected school complex houses a primary school, a

kindergarten, a high school and a lyceum. While the students essentially rescued themselves, the fire brigade arrived later to pump out the water. “We cannot possibly drown in our own schools!” the Nea Philadelphia student committee declared in an angry statement to the government. They said the students of the lyceum have been taught in makeshift classrooms made out of shipping containers for 10 years.

“You bear a great responsibility! You, previous governments and of course all municipal authorities up until today. You have not taken any action for years because our safety and health cost money. Today’s pictures from a school just a few kilometres from the centre of Athens prove these are not random events. It is criminal decisions that leave us unprotected.”

On the Monday after the storm, students, together with the parents’ association, protested in front of the local town hall, demanding immediate action and funding to repair the damage to the school and better protection in future from floods and earthquakes.

The students also demanded the reversal of the announced merging of hundreds of classes across the country, which will result in even more students being crammed into small, often dilapidated classrooms. This will not only increase the spread of COVID-19, it will also make rescue operations more difficult in the event of floods, fires or earthquakes.

As videos from the student newspaper *Foittitikos Kosmos* show, the ground floor of the Athens School of Fine Arts was also flooded, forcing students to flee the building. In the Faculty of Philosophy at the National and Kapodistrias University of Athens, rain began to drip through the ceiling during lectures. Flooding also occurred at the University of Western Attica and the University of Crete.

In the northern Greek city of Thessaloniki, a road collapsed, causing a bus carrying 15 oil workers to fall into a hole. Fortunately, the passengers were not seriously injured.

In southern Athens, near Stavros Niarchos Park, dozens of people had to rescue themselves from a bus that had become stuck in a flooded road subway and was submerged in muddy water.

The flood disaster was entirely predictable. Meteorologists and scientists had predicted that there would be heavy rainfall and flooding in the autumn, exacerbated by fierce forest fires during the record heat of the summer which had stripped away vegetation which would normally impede the flow of water and limit landslides.

“With fires, we always know that there will be flooding afterwards. This is the norm,” Nikos Belavilas, a professor at the National Technical University of Athens and head of the Urban Environment Laboratory, told Open TV. He says it was fortunate that not too much rain fell on burnt areas—otherwise the damage would have been even greater.

Experts consider the recent storm to have been of medium strength and expect even greater torrents of rain in the near future, an eventuality for which Greece is completely unprepared. Researchers have long warned that extreme weather events will increase with climate change.

Dimitris Pirounakis, the president of the Greek Environmental Federation, explained in an interview with the website *News247*: “One of the effects of climate change in Greece is that we will have more droughts in the future, resulting from long periods without rain. But when it rains, the intensity will increase, leading to more flooding.”

The danger was pronounced, especially in scorched areas such as northern Evia, he said. “Forests can prevent large amounts of water from flowing into the cities but due to the forest fires the cities are no longer protected from rainwater. Combined with deforestation and anarchic and unsustainable construction in cities (building on watercourses), this is what has happened. And that was just the beginning. Unless the necessary measures are taken to rebuild and prepare for floods, there will be very big problems in future.”

Clogged and partly dried-up rivers like the Kifissos in Athens, blocked drains and sewer manholes, a lack of street cleaning and an overall lack of stormwater infrastructure have quickly led to mudslides flooding streets, Pirounakis said.

In recent decades, there have been repeated flood disasters in Greece, which have had a disastrous impact on the lives of the working class due to the governments’ austerity policies under the dictates of the European Union and the International Monetary Fund. In 2017, when the pseudo-left Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) party was in office, 23 people died in floods in Mandra, a town in western Attica.

At the time, the WSWS explained that essential public sectors such as urban planning and flood protection were being systematically undermined. These included the

dissolution of the Public Corporation of Urban Planning and Housing (DEPOS), the relaxation of building regulations as part of the government’s privatisation policies since 2011, and the abolition of the Organisations for Regulatory Planning and Environmental Protection in the cities of Athens, Thessaloniki and Ioannina in 2014.

The consequences of these policy shifts are also pointed out by Aris Kalantidis, professor of urban planning at Manchester Metropolitan University, who told *News247* that the replacement of the independent regulatory agency in Athens by a ministry-affiliated and opaque agency, meant that de facto planning and oversight no longer exist.

While Greek politicians often refer to global climate change in general terms as a natural phenomenon in order to avoid their own responsibility for the consequences, the reality is that the rapid destruction of the planet makes immediate action all the more urgent.

Huge financial, technical and human resources must be invested immediately in public infrastructure, disaster prevention, scientific research and the fight against climate change. Families affected by forest fires and floods must receive comprehensive compensation and support.

The implementation of these measures, however, are incompatible with the capitalist profit system and the agenda of its political representatives. The ruling class in Greece and around the world acts in the interests of the banks and corporations, pumping billions into military budgets and pushing ahead with privatisation and cuts in key public sectors.

To effectively combat forest fires and floods and stop climate change requires an international, social response. Workers and youth must unite in a socialist movement to expropriate the banks and corporations and place them under the democratic control of the people. The expropriation of large fortunes and the reorganisation of the economy on the basis of a scientific plan is the precondition for solving the climate crisis in Greece and across the globe.



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