The California floods and the climate crisis

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The death toll from the ongoing storms and flooding across California and parts of Arizona, Nevada and Oregon rose to at least 18 on Wednesday. The most recent death was that of a 43-year-old woman who drowned after her car was submerged in eight feet of water. Two further deaths reported by the California governor's Office of Emergency Services are suspected to be storm-related, and the tally is expected to increase as flooding continues and the full extent of the damage emerges.

Hundreds more have had to be rescued as flooded roadways cut off and threatened those traveling during and after the holiday season. Thousands have lost their homes, and hundreds of thousands have had only intermittent power over the past two weeks. About 4.5 million people remain on flood watches or flood warnings, down from 20 million on Tuesday, and damage so far is estimated at $1 billion.

The storm system began on December 26 as a wave of seven so-called atmospheric rivers—massive bands of concentrated moisture that form over oceans and can travel thousands of miles before dropping their contained water over land—began inundating the West Coast. Flooding began on December 31 after record precipitation across the state, including the second wettest day on record in San Francisco and the wettest day in Oakland, inundated floodplains and turned whole neighborhoods into lakes.

As is the case during every storm in the United States, there is essentially no financial support for those who need to evacuate, including the poor, the elderly and the homeless. Millions have been left to fend for themselves, climbing into attics and onto roofs to escape the rising floodwaters and survive in whatever way they can.

The California floods are only one of the recent major extreme weather events that have caused massive death and destruction in the United States. A winter storm across the US from December 21 to 26 produced blizzards in Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio and Wisconsin, as well as Ontario, Canada. The storm and related cold wave killed at least 98 people, including 41 in Buffalo, New York, which suffered 56 inches of snowfall over five days.

The floods are, moreover, expected to continue. Weather forecasts predict that the parade of atmospheric rivers washing over California will continue through January 23. Yet while both California Governor Gavin Newsom and US President Joe Biden have declared emergencies in the most impacted regions, neither has made any attempt to evacuate those who will be hit (or hit again) by the storms, or provide financial aid to those who have lost their homes and livelihoods. All Newsom has so far offered is to call for Californians to "be hyper-vigilant," while opening just 11 shelters statewide, with another 20 on standby. Biden has authorized FEMA to provide assistance for storm damage-control efforts.

The indifference of Newsom and Biden to the lives of those impacted by the storm reflects the broader attitude of the American ruling elite to human life in general. As with its approach to the coronavirus pandemic, which has caused more than 1 million deaths in the US alone, predictable and predicted weather-related disasters are allowed to rip while residents are left to their fate.

Such phenomena also sharply expose the vast chasm of wealth between the working class and the corporate oligarchy that exists in the United States, especially in California. The state is home to 186 billionaires, and likely exceeded the gross domestic product of Germany in 2022 to become the world's 4th largest economy, trailing only Japan, China and the whole of the United States. At the same time, there is only a proposed $202 million for flood prevention in the state budget, and existing infrastructure has been allowed to decay for

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decades.

Nor has there been any genuine effort to mitigate climate change, which is the primary driver of such massive floods. A report published Tuesday by the European Union's Copernicus Climate Change Service showed that 2022 was the fifth hottest year on record, and that the past eight years have all had global average temperatures above 1 degree Celsius more than the pre-industrial average.

Put another way, all the years since the supposedly "historic" 2015 Paris Accords to fight climate change have shown the hollow nature of such agreements between the capitalist powers. The empty rhetoric was again on display during last year's COP27 summit, where the call to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions to limit global warming to less than 1.5 degrees Celsius, largely regarded as the "point of no return" of the climate crisis, was almost abandoned.

There is also a more sinister aspect related to the utter inaction of the major imperialist powers to the dangers of climate change--the need for fossil fuels for war. The US military by itself is one of the world's largest emitters of greenhouse gases, as tanks, boats, planes and other vehicles are deployed across the world for subjugation and slaughter. Wars themselves, such as those against Afghanistan and Iraq, are committed to secure specific oil or natural gas reserves for American corporations.

COP27 itself was overshadowed by the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, which was in part provoked to force Europe, and Germany in particular, to turn to the US for its natural gas needs. Germany has also, as a result of the war, revitalized its coal industry and largely abandoned its pledges to transition to renewable energy. Forcing an increase of fossil fuel emissions has become intertwined with the imperialist interests of the American government.

Today, Vice President Kamala Harris will speak at the University of Michigan to tout, according to the White House, the "Biden-Harris Administration's historic and ongoing work to combat the climate crisis."

If this claim were true, the hundreds of billions of dollars the White House is funneling to stoke a war in Eastern Europe would be directed towards ending global warming and stopping the ongoing and impending climate catastrophes. In reality, Harris, Biden and their ilk are engaged in "historic and ongoing work" to start World War III.

Ultimately, the California floods are another stark example of the incompatibility of the needs of society with capitalism.

Addressing the threat posed by climate change requires a global solution. But such a solution is not possible under the capitalist system, based on nation-states and the organization of society for the selfish enrichment of the financial oligarchy.

If the lives lost by floods, wildfires, blizzards, hurricanes and other extreme weather events exacerbated by climate change are to be saved, the international working class must sweep away the outmoded capitalist social order and reorganize world society on a scientific, humane, global and socialist basis.

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