

Widespread destruction from New Zealand's worst storm in decades

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The New Zealand government declared a national state of emergency yesterday morning after the top of the North Island, the most populated part of the country, was hit by devastating wind and rain from ex-Tropical Cyclone Gabrielle on Monday.

Prime Minister Chris Hipkins told a press conference yesterday it was “the most significant weather event New Zealand has seen in this century. The severity and the damage that we are seeing has not been experienced in a generation.”

At least 10,500 people have been forced to flee their homes, with 3,000 sheltering in evacuation centres. About 144,000 properties remain without power, down from 225,000 yesterday, after lines were damaged on a scale not seen since Cyclone Bola in 1988.

The cyclone has affected Auckland, a city of 1.6 million people, and several other towns including Whangarei, Tauranga, Napier, Hastings, Gisborne and surrounding areas, including many remote towns and a large amount of farmland. The impact has been made worse by flooding in Auckland and surrounding areas in late January, which displaced about 1,800 households.

Four people have died: in the rural village of Putorino a woman died when a landslide fell on her house; in Napier, a body was found washed up on the beach; Dave van Zwanenberg, a volunteer firefighter from Muriwai, west of Auckland, died after a house collapsed. A young child was found dead in Eskdale, Hawke's Bay, this afternoon.

Bridges have been swept away and land slips have blocked major roads across the North Island. Tens of thousands of people in Gisborne, the Coromandel Peninsula, the Hawke's Bay and coastal communities west of Auckland including Piha, Muriwai and Karekare, were all cut off yesterday.

Thousands of people in Hawke's Bay, Gisborne, Waikato, Coromandel, Northland and elsewhere were without power this morning. Phone and internet services

have been cut off or severely disrupted. Drinking water supplies to Gisborne, Napier and Wairoa are also damaged.

Gisborne mayor Mayor Rehette Stoltz told *Stuff* that the city of nearly 40,000 people is “in a water crisis, and we are having real difficulty getting word out about this. It will take months to fix this.”

Cyclone Gabrielle was known to be approaching New Zealand on February 9, four days before it hit, but many communities were clearly not properly prepared. Asked what people in isolated areas should do, Hipkins told reporters yesterday: “Make sure you're looking after each other, pool resources where you can with your friends and neighbours.”

Thousands of volunteers have been distributing supplies and helping with evacuations of flooded properties.

The Defence Force has also been mobilised under the state of emergency. For the military, such disasters serve as training exercises to prepare for war abroad and confrontations with the working class at home.

Under the Civil Defence Emergency Management Act, a state of emergency empowers the government to deploy police and soldiers to enforce evacuations, coordinate supplies and medical care, enter properties, requisition equipment, materials and assistance, and restrict access to roads and public places. The government can issue any other “guidelines, codes, or technical standards” deemed necessary to address the emergency, overriding other legislation.

Hipkins falsely said it was the third national state of emergency in New Zealand's history. In fact it is the fourth: the first, which he did not mention, was declared by prime minister Sid Holland on February 21, 1951 during the waterfront dispute. It empowered soldiers to be deployed to replace locked out and striking workers.

The government website *New Zealand History* notes: “Draconian emergency regulations imposed rigid

ensorship, gave police sweeping powers of search and arrest and made it an offence for citizens to assist strikers—even giving food to their children was outlawed.”

A state of emergency was also declared following the 2011 Christchurch earthquake and in 2020 during the first stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Economists estimate the cost to the economy from the disaster will be in the tens of billions of dollars. There have been suggestions that it could rival the 2010-2011 Christchurch earthquakes, which had a rebuild cost of about \$40 billion and left tens of thousands of homes uninhabitable.

The *New Zealand Herald* reported yesterday that one insurance company was getting “one claim per minute.” This is in addition to what the Insurance Council estimates are 40,000 claims from the earlier Auckland floods.

Damage to food crops, farms and supply chains is expected to further push up food prices, which have already soared by 10.3 percent in the past year while fruit and vegetable prices increased by 15.7 percent—far outstripping the 4.1 percent increase in wages in 2022.

The flooding will greatly exacerbate the country’s housing crisis. Already more than 100,000 people (2 percent of the population) are either homeless or living in rundown or unsafe housing.

The disaster comes at a time when the ruling elite is ruthlessly imposing the full burden of the global economic crisis onto the working class. The Reserve Bank is increasing interest rates to push up unemployment in order to keep wages down.

The Labour Party-led government, which includes the Greens, is imposing austerity measures, starving healthcare and other essential services. Hipkins told Radio NZ earlier this month that “[government] expenditure is actually going to track downwards for the next few years.”

According to *Newsroom*, funding for the health system “to fight COVID-19 in the first half of 2023 is less than half of what it had been in the second half of 2022.” This is based on false claims by the government that the pandemic is over. Thanks to Labour’s removal of public health measures, dozens of people are dying and hundreds are being hospitalised every week from the coronavirus.

The floods, like the Christchurch earthquake, are already being used as a pretext for more cuts and privatisations.

Auckland mayor Wayne Brown has reversed planned cuts for storm water management and announced an

additional \$20 million a year for prevention and mitigation of severe weather events. In a press statement, however, Brown declared that the council still had to address an “operating budget gap of \$295 million.” He also declared that the flooding “highlights the need to think very seriously about selling underperforming assets.”

It is widely acknowledged that the recent extreme weather—two so-called “one in a hundred year” storms in the space of a fortnight—is due to climate change.

In response to popular anger about the lack of action to stop global warming, minister for climate change and Green Party co-leader James Shaw told parliament he was also “angry” about “the lost decades that we spent bickering and arguing about whether climate change was real or not, whether it was caused by humans or not, whether it was bad or not, whether we should do something about it or not, because it is clearly here now, and if we do not act, it will get worse.”

The Greens, however, uphold the very capitalist system that is responsible for catastrophic climate change. During the 2021 nationwide climate strike by school students, Shaw praised the “chief executives of some of our largest companies” who he falsely claimed were acting to address climate change.

In fact, it is the world’s largest corporations, including those based in New Zealand, which are responsible for the vast majority of carbon emissions. A rational and scientific response to the climate crisis is only possible through the reorganisation of the global economy along socialist lines. The world’s resources and major industries must be taken out of the hands of the business elite that exploits them for profit, and placed under democratic control of the working class.



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