

New Zealand's flooding disaster and the case for socialism

Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand)
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Large parts of the North Island of New Zealand, including Auckland, Northland, the East Coast and Hawke's Bay, remain in a state of devastation after unprecedented floods triggered by Cyclone Gabrielle, which hit the country on February 13.

The cyclone and the severe January 27 floods killed a total of 15 people. More than 10,500 people were displaced and many will never be able to return to their destroyed homes. In some areas, entire villages and suburbs may need to be abandoned. Thousands of families who have lost everything are now in temporary accommodation, including motels and hotels, for which they must pay rent.

Across much of the country bridges have been destroyed, roads cut off, and farms and businesses inundated. The loss of crops, orchards and livestock will push up food prices, which already surged by 11.3 percent in 2022. There are warnings that landlords will use the housing shortage to raise rents, which have already increased by around \$23 a week over the last year.

The cost of rebuilding will be in the tens of billions of dollars and could exceed that of the 2011 Christchurch earthquake. Money borrowed by the state to rebuild infrastructure will inevitably be recouped through cuts to social spending, at the expense of the working class.

The cyclone was the most destructive to hit New Zealand in more than 50 years, but the enormous scale of the damage was not inevitable. Such natural disasters are made immeasurably worse because the preparations needed to protect people's lives, homes and livelihoods are incompatible with the capitalist system, in which every political and economic decision is geared to the accumulation of profits by big business and the financial elite.

The disaster was foreseeable. Authorities warned of the approach of Cyclone Gabrielle four days before it hit New Zealand, but preparations for its impact were completely inadequate. Many areas known to be at heightened risk of flooding were not evacuated, with people told to make their own decisions about whether to stay or go. Remote towns

that are frequently cut off by landslides and floods were not equipped to spend days or weeks cut off from electricity, telecommunications, food supplies and healthcare services. The lack of satellite phones or radios left many thousands of people uncontactable for days.

More generally, scientists have been warning for more than four decades that carbon emissions from human activity would lead to higher global temperatures, rising sea levels and more frequent and destructive storms. Cyclone Gabrielle follows similarly catastrophic flooding in California in January and in Lismore, Australia last year.

The Labour Party-led government, which includes the Green Party, falsely claims that the climate crisis can be addressed under capitalism. In reality, all efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adopt carbon-neutral technologies run up against the entrenched power of fossil fuel giants and other big polluters, which control politics in every country. New Zealand's emissions increased by 26 per cent between 1990 and 2020, driven largely by the expansion of industrial dairy farming.

Stopping emissions to prevent a catastrophic temperature rise demands a globally coordinated effort, incompatible with the division of the planet into rival capitalist countries. What is required is nothing less than restructuring the global economy along socialist lines. The world's resources and major industries must be placed in public ownership and under the democratic control of the working class, so they can be used in a rational and scientific manner to address urgent social needs, not to enrich a handful of billionaires.

Cyclone Gabrielle has laid bare the consequences of environmental destruction and the running down of vital infrastructure under successive governments and councils. According to *Stuff*, 55,000 houses in Auckland are in flood zones and since 2016 Auckland Council has granted consent for 4,295 more houses in flood-prone areas. To make way for property developments, the vast majority of New Zealand's natural wetlands, which mitigate floods, have been destroyed or damaged.

The damage on the East Coast and Hawke's Bay

highlights the rapacious and uncontrolled activities of forestry companies. Vast amounts of woody debris, or slash, from logging operations washed down flooded waterways, smashing into bridges, farms and houses.

The forestry industry, according to researcher Max Rashbrooke, made profits of \$15 billion since 2013, achieved through low wages, casualised working conditions, and the refusal to deal safely with waste. The extreme lack of regulation stems from the Lange Labour Party government's decision in 1987 to transform the state-owned forests into a for-profit business, which was followed by privatisation.

All of this reinforces the urgent necessity for working people and youth to fight for the reorganisation of society on socialist lines. The wealth created by the working class must be taken out of the hands of the corporate elite, so it can be used to address immediate human needs and prevent future disasters.

The tens of thousands of people who lost their homes, vehicles and other possessions must be rehoused and fully compensated, regardless of their insurance status. Following the Christchurch earthquakes, thousands of families spent years fighting private and state-owned insurance companies over funding for repairs and rebuilds. Many never recovered financially. This cannot be allowed to happen again!

Small business owners and farmers whose crops have been ruined must also be made whole. And a public works program is needed to provide high-paying jobs for workers in forestry, agriculture and other industries who have been made unemployed.

The cyclone exposed the fragility of electricity and telecommunications services, which have been largely privatised since the 1980s. Tens of thousands of people were left without power and were uncontactable for days or even weeks. These vital utilities must be re-nationalised, with funding allocated to strengthen their resilience.

Tens of billions of dollars must also be found to assist the populations of small Pacific island countries such as Tuvalu, Kiribati, Tonga and Samoa, which are most at risk from rising seas and destructive storms. The imperialist powers, including New Zealand and Australia, bear direct responsibility for the impoverishment of the Pacific countries and their lack of vital infrastructure. All those seeking to migrate from parts of the world that have become unlivable must be granted residence.

The Labour government and opposition parties will declare that such measures are unaffordable. This is a lie.

During 2020 and 2021 the government seized on the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext to engineer the biggest transfer of wealth to the rich in New Zealand's history. Tens of billions of dollars were handed over to big businesses

through bailouts, tax breaks and subsidies.

The Reserve Bank purchased \$53.5 billion worth of bonds from the commercial banks to drive down interest rates, fuelling property speculation and driving up the cost of housing for ordinary people. As a result New Zealand's major banks reported record profits of \$9.7 billion last financial year alone.

The vast wealth hoarded by the banks, insurance giants and other corporations, must be expropriated. In addition, the billions of dollars wasted on upgrading New Zealand's military and integrating the country into US war plans against China and the war against Russia, must be redirected to meet social needs.

In every country, the ruling class is imposing the cost of the worsening economic crisis on working people. Unemployment is being driven up and real wages slashed. The NZ Labour government is refusing to raise taxes on the rich, while starving public services. It has removed funding for COVID-related public health measures, even as the pandemic continues to rage out of control, killing dozens of people each week.

Like climate change, the refusal by governments to eliminate COVID-19, allowing the virus to kill tens of millions of people worldwide, is an unanswerable indictment of capitalism. The ruling class views all measures to stop the spread of COVID and strengthen the health system as an unacceptable drain on their profits.

We call on everyone who agrees with this statement to contact the Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand, and build its youth organisation, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality. Join the fight to unify the international working class to overthrow capitalism and build a socialist society. This is the only way to end war and exploitation, and to make possible a scientifically planned, fully-resourced solution to the climate crisis.



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