

The international significance of the earthquake disaster in Turkey and Syria

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These remarks were delivered by Ula? Ate?çi, a leading member of the Social Equality Group in Turkey, to a meeting of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at New York University on March 11, 2023.

I am glad to address this meeting in the United States on the massive earthquake disaster in Turkey and Syria last month, and I would like to thank the comrades in the IYSSE for this opportunity.

It is extremely important that this social catastrophe is discussed and understood all over the world because it is a global and historic event in every sense. But it must be emphasized that this devastation is not unique to Turkey and Syria. In 2015, scientists estimated that around 1.5 billion people live in earthquake-prone areas, and this population is growing. Most strikingly, the official death toll from major earthquakes in this century alone is around 750,000.

On February 6, two massive earthquakes within nine hours caused unprecedented destruction and loss of life in Turkey and Syria. The total official death toll in the two countries is still rising and is approaching 60,000. It is thought that the real death toll could be over 150,000.

Turkey is an earthquake-prone country, and the area hit last month has witnessed countless major earthquakes in the past. However, the last time a loss of life of this magnitude is thought to have occurred was around 1,500 years ago.

Vast changes in human culture and technology have taken place over the past 15 centuries. The industrial revolution and the scientific-technological revolution of the last decades in particular are an unprecedented advance in human history. It is not possible to control the tectonic plates, but it is now entirely possible to make cities, infrastructure and buildings resistant to

major earthquakes. Alerting masses of people of an impending earthquake, even if only a short time before it strikes, can now be done through early warning systems.

However, despite decades of warnings by scientists about the expected earthquakes in the region, no safety measures were taken by the ruling elites of Turkey or Syria. Millions of people living in unsafe buildings were left to their fate. Not even an early warning system was invested in. That is why people in Hatay, where the earthquake hit the hardest, continued to sleep, unaware of the earthquake in Mara?, which started about a minute earlier. The masses in Syria would probably have had a longer time to leave their buildings. In short, it was possible to prevent all the destruction that occurred in these earthquakes. Tens of thousands of deaths could have been prevented.

The catastrophe caused by the earthquake in Syria cannot be understood outside of the historical context of the decades-long imperialist wars throughout the Middle East. Following the devastating wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, the US-led NATO powers, including Turkey, launched a war of regime change in Syria in 2011. They and their proxies have devastated and divided the country. Moreover, the crippling sanctions and blockade imposed by the US-led imperialist powers against Syria have prevented the rescue of thousands of people under the rubble. Virtually no aid has been delivered to the survivors.

This point is of immense importance. The US and other NATO powers have spent more than \$100 billion on the war in Ukraine. One hundred billion dollars for massive slaughter and destruction! According to US estimates, which claim that Russia has suffered 100,000 casualties, this means that \$1 million has been spent to kill or wound every Russian soldier in the war. In

contrast, the US administration pledged only \$185 million last month for earthquake victims. It is equivalent to about \$7.50 for each of the 25 million people affected. And now the Biden administration is requesting \$1 trillion for its 2024 military budget to prepare for world war against Russia and China. Trillions of dollars for war! But there is no money for emergency needs after the earthquake, let alone to ensure that people can live in safe houses!

For Turkey, the responsibility of the President Erdoğan government for this massive social crime is evident. It has been in power for over 20 years.

The “right to life,” first clearly articulated in the United States Declaration of Independence in 1776, has been declared sacred in countless constitutions all over the world. This includes Turkey’s constitution. It says: “Everyone has the right to life, to protect and improve his material and spiritual existence.” And the government is legally required to ensure this.

However, in today’s capitalist society, which is divided along class lines, governments are first and foremost obliged to fulfill the interests of the ruling class they represent. And these interests prioritize capitalist profit and wealth accumulation over long-term investments in public health and safety. In this context, it must be emphasized that all political factions of the ruling class bear responsibility for this preventable catastrophe. This is, in the final analysis, a catastrophe resulting from the capitalist system that all the establishment parties defend.

This means that this urgent and vital problem facing the masses cannot be solved by a simple change of government. In Turkey, over 20 million people in the Marmara region, including Istanbul, live under the threat of an impending earthquake. One month after the catastrophe in February, nothing has been done to ensure the safety of this great mass of people. The obstacles to this are social, not natural.

The earthquake disaster has also clearly demonstrated the need for an international response to such global events. But there is another obstacle to this response: The capitalist division of the world into rival nation states.

The same obstacles stand in the way of a worldwide scientific response to the COVID-19 pandemic and global climate change. The “profits before lives” policy during the pandemic has led to the deaths of over 20

million people. And still thousands of people die globally every day from this preventable pandemic.

The fact that humanity is on the brink of a nuclear third world war also stems from the same fundamental contradictions of the capitalist system.

However, the same contradictions of capitalism that led to these social disasters are also driving the working class all over the world into struggle. This is the only social force that can prevent new disasters.

All of these fundamental problems arising from the global capitalist system can only be solved on an international and socialist basis. The reorganization of the world economy on the basis of social needs, not private profit, is a task that only the international working class can fulfill.



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