

Floods and landslides in Italy: a man-made disaster

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A state of emergency remains in force in the Italian region of Emilia-Romagna, following last week's severe floods. The disaster is another stark warning of the worsening impacts of climate change, which is ultimately man-made and a consequence of the capitalist economic system.

Floodwaters have only very slowly receded from the villages and fields in the hinterland of the Adriatic coastal strip. In the affected area, which stretches from Ravenna and Cesena to Bologna, the floods claimed at least 14 lives. More than 36,000 have had to leave their homes, over 20,000 in the Rimini area alone, and thousands remain in emergency accommodation, their houses and apartments destroyed. Many roads and train lines remain impassable after 22 rivers broke their banks and no less than 300 landslides occurred.

In the last few days, the storm has continued to spread, and a red alert was issued in other Italian regions last weekend. In Sicily and Calabria, flooding occurred as a result of heavy rain. In Reggio Calabria, strong winds added to the situation, with one man killed by a falling tree. In Piedmont in northern Italy, where the Po River has flooded, roads near the river had to be closed in the city of Turin.

In Emilia-Romagna and the neighbouring areas, this flood-of-the-century destroyed the grain, fruit and vegetable harvests. Whole plantations of strawberries, apricots, apples or peaches have been covered with silt and devastated. Thousands of cattle, pigs and sheep have also drowned, and many farms were completely cut off by landslides.

In addition, there is an increased risk of infection due to contaminated drinking water. According to the Italian Society for Environmental Medicine, sewage has overflowed in several places and elderly people and children in particular are at risk of gastrointestinal

infections, skin diseases and conjunctivitis. Residents have been advised to protect themselves with a tetanus vaccination.

On the Adriatic, from Ravenna to Rimini, the holiday season should now be starting. For more than 120 years, the coastal region has lived on the basis of tourism, after the beach resort of Rimini was built at the end of the 19th century following completion of the Milan-Ancona railway line, which reaches to the sea. Just before the Spring holiday, however, storm tides washed over the beaches and partly swept them away. Tens of thousands of cubic metres of sand have been washed away, along with cabins, sunbeds and parasols. Pumps are running day and night to clear the basements of hotels and restaurants.

The response of Italy's Tourism Minister, Daniela Santanché, herself an entrepreneur and a member of the far-right La Destra-Fiamma Tricolore party, was merely to call on Italians and international guests to spend their holidays on the Adriatic despite the damage.

Last Thursday, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (CDU) visited the affected region together with the neo-fascist head of government Giorgia Meloni. "Europe is with you," von der Leyen declared afterwards at Bologna airport. She boasted about the pumping equipment that the EU Civil Protection had provided to Italy and announced aid from the EU Civil Protection Fund.

Meloni, who heads the neo-fascist party Fratelli d'Italia, had left the G7 summit in Hiroshima early, after the extent of the disaster became known. Together with the long-time president of the Emilia-Romagna region, Stefano Bonaccini (Democratic Party-PD), Meloni then trudged through the area in rain boots, shedding crocodile tears and promising the region two

billion euros in financial aid, promised by the Council of Ministers.

All the promises made by Meloni, von der Leyen and others cannot hide the fact that all capitalist government politicians, regardless of their respective party, have shown themselves incapable and unwilling to take the rational and necessary measures to prevent such a catastrophe.

This also applies to regional president Bonaccini, who is considered “left-wing” and was once a member of the PCI, the Italian Communist Party. In Emilia-Romagna, the supposed “leftists,” the PD and previously the PCI, have been in government for 78 years. During that time they did virtually nothing to prevent floods, landslides and other disasters.

Especially in the tourism strongholds near the coast, the soil has been concreted over on a large scale and rivers straightened. In the mountains behind, the forests have been cut down and the infrastructure as a whole has been neglected for decades. Long overdue dam works have been delayed and necessary retention areas and other projects put on a back burner.

Politico referred to an €8.4 billion flood protection programme set up by then-head of government Matteo Renzi in 2014. This was left virtually unused after a series of governments diverted the money to other, seemingly more urgent projects.

Italy is particularly vulnerable to environmental disasters. According to a 2021 report by the national environmental protection institute ISPRA, 94 percent of its municipalities are at risk of being affected by landslides, earthquakes, floods or tidal waves. No less than 8 million inhabitants live in vulnerable locations. The report lists more than 11,200 projects allocated over 10 billion euros during the last 20 years. Less than half of the projects have been implemented and only a third of the money used on environmental projects.

Corruption, greed and indifference are among the causes of the disaster that scientists and researchers had long warned of. Added to the neglect of infrastructure is the utter indifference with which capitalist government politicians approach climate change.

Climate change has clearly exacerbated recent environmental events in Italy, as the European Mediterranean Climate Policy Institute, the Centro Euro-Mediterraneo sui Cambiamenti Climatici (cmcc), has now confirmed. In the last two years, high

temperatures and the absence of rainfall had led to unusual dryness and drought. This has reduced the soil’s ability to absorb water and increased the formation of cracks. The first heavy rains in early May then saturated the upper layers of the earth and created ideal conditions for landslides. Following this, it only took new heavy rains, such as those that began in the third week of May, to cause a catastrophe throughout the region.

The floods and landslides in Emilia-Romagna are only the latest of a series of natural disasters in Italy in recent years. They are harbingers of what will happen if global warming continues. It is precisely because of its long and densely populated coastal strips that Italy is particularly at risk, as the example of the lagoon city of Venice vividly shows.

The capitalist class is not in a position to solve the climate crisis, and each new catastrophe only reveals more clearly the consequences of this economic system for society. What is needed is a revolutionary transformation of property and production relations. The principle of private profit-seeking, which currently dominates all aspects of life, must be replaced by internationally coordinated, socialist planning.



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