

The social roots of the Moroccan earthquake disaster

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On Friday evening, September 8, at 11:11 p.m. local time, a devastating earthquake measuring 6.8 on the Richter scale struck southern Morocco, near Marrakech. The death toll has already surpassed 2,800 people, many in small, isolated towns in the High Atlas mountains, where the quake was centered. At least 3,000 are wounded, many critically, and time is rapidly running out for many more still trapped under collapsed buildings.

While 18 died in Marrakech, a global center of tourism with a population of nearly 1 million, most died in mountain villages, whose old, vulnerable mud-brick houses were shattered by the quake. In one village, Tafeghaghte, 90 of 200 inhabitants are confirmed dead, with dozens more missing and feared to be dead or trapped in the rubble.

The few press reports emerging from these villages show that the Moroccan government is mostly leaving quake victims to fend for themselves. Private citizens in Agadir, Marrakech and other areas less badly hit by the quake are having to buy food, water and other critical supplies and transport them to the villages in their personal cars.

“There’s no sign of the authorities for the moment. We’re so isolated here. Without benefactors, we would starve,” one inhabitant of a village hit by the quake, Mustapha El-Machmoum, told AFP. “We asked the authorities for tents yesterday, but nothing arrived. We’re sleeping on the ground in the cold. Adults can cope with this, but not the children.”

Like the Turkish-Syrian earthquake that claimed many tens of thousands of lives last February, the Moroccan earthquake catastrophe is not only a natural disaster. The knowledge and technology exists to greatly limit the impact of such events. Their disastrous consequences are entirely bound up with existing

economic interests and social conditions. Under capitalism, policy is dominated by the pursuit of corporate profit and personal wealth by the ruling elites, who are contemptuous of the lives of the masses of people.

The effectiveness of modern, earthquake-resistant housing and the necessity of building it are well known to scientists. The 2021 Fukushima earthquake in Japan, one of the world’s most earthquake-prone countries, reached over 7 on the Richter scale. Yet, thanks to the considerable investments in earthquake-resistant housing in Japan, only three people died and 16 were seriously injured.

In 2021, the *International Journal of Disaster Risk Science* found that 1.5 billion people live in earthquake-prone areas worldwide. A *Forbes* list of the 10 most quake-prone cities—Kathmandu, Istanbul, Delhi, Quito, Manila, Islamabad, San Salvador, Mexico City, Izmir and Jakarta—is largely made up of vast cities of millions of people. A 1999 *Nature* article warned, however, that earthquake-resistant housing is a “low priority,” adding: “The absence of earthquake-resistant construction in future cities would be indefensible.”

The capitalist class, in control of every national government, has rejected the necessary spending on safer housing as an intolerable drain on its profits. Instead, since 1990, trillions of dollars have gone to bank bailouts and the US-NATO wars in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali and Ukraine. Today, the world’s eight wealthiest individuals own the same amount as half the world’s population. But in countless earthquake-prone areas, masses of people live in housing that can condemn them to death in case of a major quake.

Morocco sits along the fault between the African and Eurasian tectonic plates and has seen major

earthquakes, including in 1960 at Agadir and in 2004 at Al Hoceima. Yet not only are Moroccans left in unsafe mud-brick housing, but no preparations were made for substantial disaster response.

Moroccan King Mohammed VI, a longstanding ally of US and French imperialism, was vacationing in his €80 million mansion next to the Eiffel Tower in Paris when the quake hit. He has made no statement since his return to Morocco, only releasing a brief clip, without sound, of him talking to security and health officials. No other officials have yet been able to issue statements, Moroccan journalist Omar Brouksy said, as there is “a rule, unwritten but unswervingly obeyed, [that] states that no official can speak or make a public trip before the sovereign.”

In terms of cold indifference to the plight of the earthquake victims, the Moroccan king was surpassed only by that of France, a former colonial power in Morocco. France’s Moroccan diaspora numbers over 1.5 million people, and Marrakech is a highly popular vacation destination in France. Yet, after the Moroccan monarchy indicated that it preferred to invite Spanish, British, Qatari and UAE rescue teams rather than French ones, President Emmanuel Macron’s government announced a donation of just €5 million to rescue and aid organizations in Morocco.

This means that Macron is donating to Morocco the cost of just one of the 30 Caesar heavy artillery systems he has sent to Ukraine for the NATO war on Russia.

The indifference of capitalist governments to essential social needs of the working population, which they view with fear and hostility, inevitably recalls the last great Moroccan earthquake, thought to have surpassed the current Marrakech quake. In November 1755, twin earthquakes devastated the Portuguese city of Lisbon and the Moroccan city of Meknès.

In the passage in *Candide* that he devoted to the Lisbon earthquake, Enlightenment author Voltaire lampooned the defenders of the absolute monarchies that then ruled over Europe. The devastation from the Lisbon quake tore apart their complacent claims that “Everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.” Three decades after Voltaire published his work, the absolute monarchy by divine right was swept away by the French Revolution.

Over two centuries later, the Moroccan earthquake exposes the bankruptcy of the capitalist order, which is

no less corrupt and outlived than the French absolute monarchy was in Voltaire’s day.

In Libya, authorities of the Libyan National Army (LNA) reported yesterday that 2,000 were killed and over 5,000 missing after a dam broke and flood waters swept away much of the city of Derna. The LNA controls the eastern half of Libya, which has been divided between rival militias fighting a bloody civil war ever since the 2011 NATO war against Libya.

In Turkey, countless thousands of victims of the February quake still live in tents, while the Turkish government oversees the building of more non-earthquake-resistant housing into which workers are again to be forced—and in which thousands would again die in the next quake. Is there any doubt that, if the matter is left in the hands of stooges of the banks like Mohammed VI and Macron, they will prepare the next preventable earthquake catastrophe?

Around the world, the working class is faced with the reality that a tiny, irresponsible ruling elite squanders vast social resources essential to the well-being and even the survival of the population. Impervious to demands for change, it is obsessed with its pursuit of militarism and its own obscene wealth. This is true both in former colonial countries like Morocco and in imperialist “democracies” like France, where riot police this spring brutally repressed mass protests against Macron’s overwhelmingly unpopular pension cuts.

The way forward for the working class is to take control of the essential resources of world industry and trade by wresting them from the hands of the bourgeoisie and use them to meet basic social needs, including earthquake safety. As anger erupts across Europe and Africa—where masses of workers and youth are demanding that French troops leave countries like Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso—the objective conditions for such a struggle are emerging. It requires the unification of workers in Africa, Europe and internationally in a struggle against capitalism and for socialism.



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