

One year since the Turkey-Syria earthquake—Part 3

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This is the third and concluding part of a series. Part 1 was published on February 5, 2024 and Part 2 on February 6, 2024.

March 31 local elections and the impending disaster in Istanbul

With local elections to be held at the end of March, Turkey has once again entered a period in which the candidates of the bourgeois parties list promises that are known in advance to be unrealizable. The focus of these elections will be Istanbul and the Marmara region, where 18.49 percent of the Turkish population lives and where, according to scientists, the probability of a major earthquake is very high.

Experts from the German Research Centre for Geosciences (GFZ) have highlighted the possibility of a 7.4 magnitude earthquake in the Sea of Marmara in their research analysing the tectonic structure of Turkey. According to Turkish Professor Naci Görür, one of Turkey's most respected earthquake scientists, the risk of an earthquake in Istanbul at any time is 47 percent. "It is almost like tossing a coin," he said.

In another interview, he described the dangers facing millions of working people in Istanbul as follows: "A simple account: there are 1.6 million buildings. Let's reduce all mortal cases to 1 percent in Istanbul. This means 16,000 buildings. Suppose that each building has four floors. It means 64,000 floors. If we assume two apartments on each floor, it means 128,000 apartments. Put four people in each apartment. Does it exceed 400,000 [deaths]?"

In 2021, Mahir Polat, a top official of the Istanbul municipality, said it is estimated that 200,000 buildings in Istanbul will suffer moderate to severe damage in the expected earthquake. Approximately three million people might be affected.

This means that around 16 million people in Istanbul

and 24 million in the Marmara region are still living under great risk, but there is no official preparation to prevent even a much bigger disaster. This high level of contempt by the entire Turkish ruling elite toward working people in danger is despite the fact that only a year ago an official estimate of 60,000 people in Turkey and Syria died in much less densely populated urban areas.

Under these conditions, Murat Kurum has been selected as the Erdoğan-led AKP's candidate for the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality. Kurum served as Minister of Environment, Urbanisation and Climate Change between 2018 and 2023. Through his actions, he not only shares political responsibility for the buildings that collapsed in the February 2023 earthquake, but also for making cities and residential areas across Turkey vulnerable to new disaster risks.

Kurum served as the general manager of the state's housing development administration's (TOKİ) subsidiary Emlak Konut GYO A.Ş. between 2009 and 2018 before becoming a government minister. He has started his election campaign with commitments under the title of "earthquake-oriented urban transformation." But during this period, in many cities, especially in Istanbul, he opened up landfills, coastlines, riverbeds, agricultural land and military zones—which had previously been prohibited for construction—for development through TOKİ and started intensive construction activities in these areas.

Most of the skyscrapers built in earthquake-prone Istanbul during the AKP period were built during Murat Kurum's term as general manager of Emlak Konut GYO A.Ş. That someone responsible for these skyscrapers and "vertical architecture" is now defending low-rise "horizontal architecture" can only be explained by the new political role given to him.

In addition, Kurum, as a minister, continued a zoning amnesty, which entered into force on June 6, 2018 with the signature of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Many of the buildings that collapsed in the February 6 earthquakes and caused the deaths of thousands of people benefited from this amnesty.

The “urban transformation” carried out for four years by Ekrem İmamoğlu, the current mayor of Istanbul and the candidate of the CHP, was presented as a remedy against earthquakes. But it transformed very few buildings, like the AKP-led city administration before it, and also served to remove working class residents from the city centre and the building of luxury residences for the wealthy making huge profits in the process.

İmamoğlu's mayoralty was a period in which only land studies, building scans and statistical studies were carried out regarding earthquakes, and actual transformation was almost never carried out. While the municipality has a construction company named KİPTAŞ that can build secure houses with affordable prices, it refuses to do this and directs applications for urban transformation to contractors. These contractors, in turn, offer to build houses at inflated prices, which in most cases the applicants cannot afford. İmamoğlu presents this policy as a “public service.”

According to the Istanbul municipality, 800,000 of Istanbul's 1.2 million buildings were built according to pre-2000 construction and earthquake regulations. It is estimated that about 200,000 of these buildings would be severely damaged or demolished in a major quake. These buildings house a total of 1.3 million households and a population of approximately 3 million.

In Turkey, most of the population lives under the constant threat of a destruction from an earthquake, including more than 24 million people in the Marmara region, which includes Istanbul. One year after the disaster of February 2023, nothing concrete has been done to ensure the safety of this huge mass of people.

The obstacles are not natural but social. A catastrophe in the Marmara region, like the Maraş earthquake, will ultimately be a disaster caused by the capitalist system, defended by the political establishment including the pseudo-left groups lined up behind the CHP in the 2019 local elections and 2023 presidential elections.

To rebuild many cities of the world, such as Istanbul, threatened by natural disasters, with scientific planning

and with the highest level of robustness and quality of life, and in order to provide all people with the basic right to safe housing, a gigantic public works plan must be implemented. But this requires a conscious political struggle for workers' power internationally against all factions of the ruling class and the capitalist system they defend. It means the fight for international socialism based on global planning of the economy according to the needs of society, not for profit. The 2023 Turkey-Syria earthquake and the inaction that has followed have bitterly vindicated this perspective.

Concluded



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