

Twenty-fifth anniversary of the August 17, 1999 Gölcük earthquake

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August 17 marks the 25th anniversary of the 1999 Kocaeli/Gölcük earthquake. At 3.02 am in the morning, an earthquake with a magnitude of at least 7.4 Mw struck the North Anatolian Fault Line, causing widespread destruction and loss of life.

The earthquake was felt throughout the Marmara region and from Ankara to Izmir. According to official reports, around 18,000 people died and nearly 25,000 were injured, but other estimates put the death toll at 50,000 and the numbers injured at around 100,000.

Despite the 25 years that have passed, no serious precautions have been taken for the major Marmara earthquake, which is expected on the same fault line, and the preventable deaths of officially more than 50,000 people as a result of the earthquakes centred on Kahramanmaraş last year. This is an indictment against the capitalist system and the entire political order, including the pseudo-left parties.

Following the 1999 earthquake, some 2,100 lawsuits were filed against the builders of the buildings that collapsed due to construction defects. While 1,800 of these cases were closed with no penalties under an amnesty in 2000, some of the remaining cases were time-barred and penalties imposed in a few cases were deferred.

The collective acquittal of those who built supposedly earthquake-resistant houses, and of the political institutions and authorities that enabled them, was a declaration that the ruling class would not take any serious measures to solve the problem of safe housing, abandoning millions of people to their fate in future major earthquakes.

Turkey is an earthquake-prone country, with many cities built on active faultlines, and has a disastrous earthquake record.

On February 6 last year, two devastating earthquakes

measuring 7.7 and 7.6 on the Richter scale struck the southern Turkish city of Kahramanmaraş, near the Syrian border, within nine hours of each other. On the first anniversary of the earthquake, Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya updated the official death toll to 53,537 and the number of injured to 107,213. He said that 38,901 buildings had been destroyed.

In Syria, which has been devastated for years by the imperialist powers led by the US and its allies such as Turkey and subjected to sanctions and embargoes, nearly 10,000 people lost their lives and thousands were injured, according to official figures.

Even these devastating earthquakes have not shaken the ruling class's appetite for profit. As has been shown by the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, profit comes before human life for the ruling class around the world. The country's limited resources are not invested in strengthening infrastructure and disaster preparedness for the benefit of society, but in the further transfer of wealth to the ruling class, in military armament and the construction of an authoritarian regime for the protection of the interests of the ruling class.

It is a global problem. In 2015, scientists estimated that around 1.5 billion people lived in earthquake-prone areas. The official death toll from major earthquakes in the 21st century alone is around 750,000.

The industrial revolution in scientific and technological developments, especially in recent decades, make it possible to prevent the devastating consequences of earthquakes. Although it is not possible to control the tectonic plates, it is possible to make cities, infrastructure and buildings resistant to major earthquakes. But the outdated capitalist nation-state system is the overarching obstacle to such a response.

Although a year and a half has passed since the Kahramanmaraş earthquakes, the problems of a significant number of earthquake victims continue. The promises made by the government in the country, where two major elections were held after the earthquake, have remained largely unfulfilled. As with the 1999 earthquake, none of the high-level officials who were responsible for the destruction and deaths have been held to account.

On the contrary, all bourgeois political parties, both the government and the opposition, have tacitly declared that they will commit similar offences by seeing no harm in renominating the officials whose negligence in the loss of lives in the earthquakes was obvious and who did not take precautions.

The Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, chose Murat Kurum, who served as Minister of Environment, Urbanisation and Climate Change between 2018 and 2023, as its candidate for the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality in the local elections held last March.

The Republican People's Party (CHP) renominated the Metropolitan Mayor Lütfü Savaş, who was politically responsible for turning the earthquake into a major disaster in Hatay, where the worst devastation occurred. Both Kurum and Savaş lost the election.

After the August 17 Gölcük earthquake, research indicates that the future earthquake on the same fault line will be in the Sea of Marmara, off the coast of Istanbul, with a magnitude of at least 7 on the Richter scale.

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.

The catastrophic damage and loss of life caused by the earthquake in Kahramanmaraş is a warning of what such a quake would do to Turkey's most populous and most industrially-developed region. In Istanbul, Kocaeli, Tekirdağ, Bursa, Balıkesir, Çanakkale and Yalova, over 24 million people would be affected disastrously by an earthquake centred under the Marmara Sea.

In 2021, an Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality's (İBB) official said that an earthquake in Istanbul would cause moderate or severe damage to an estimated

200,000 buildings, which could affect around 3 million people.

Despite this, no serious preparations are made by central and local governments for earthquake threats. Government and municipal projects leave millions of workers living in earthquake-unstable buildings at the mercy of building firms and banks. Apartment dwellers are being asked to pay millions of Turkish lira for renovations. The vast majority of the population, who have already trapped in an unsustainable spiral of debt under conditions of rising living costs and impoverishment, continues to live in unstable houses.

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 to provide all people with the basic right to safe housing, a gigantic public works plan must be implemented.

Time is being wasted when the technology and labour are available to build millions of safe houses in a very short time in Turkey and everywhere in the world where there is a risk of earthquakes. Because such international and rational solutions are blocked by the capitalist system, they are not realised by the political representatives of the ruling class.

A real solution requires a conscious political struggle for workers' power. It means the fight for international socialism, based on global planning of the economy according to the needs of society.



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