Washington state floods force more than 100,000 to evacuate

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The series of floods across western Washington that began December 8 have exposed decades of infrastructure neglect and the class character of disaster response under capitalism. More than 100,000 residents faced evacuation orders as rivers shattered records, and Washington Governor Bob Ferguson declared a state of emergency on December 10.

The immediate cause of the floods was an atmospheric river, a meteorological formation containing abnormally high amounts of moisture, that drifted over western Oregon, Washington and British Columbia, Canada. The storm system has dumped an estimated 5 trillion gallons on the region and also triggered an enormous amount of snowfall runoff from nearby mountains.

The majority of the impact has been in the areas surrounding the Cowlitz, Skagit and Green rivers, and numerous others broke all-time flood records on December 11, the day rainfall reached its height. More than 75,000 people in Skagit County alone were ordered to evacuate last week. Another 46,000 in Kent, Renton and Tukwila were threatened with flash flooding on December 15 in the wake of the breach of the Desimone levee on the Green River.

The town of Stehekin lost its water treatment plant and power due to flooding and mudslides, and the town of Leavenworth has also lost power from the floods. Coast Guard helicopters conducted at least 250 water rescues statewide, particularly in Sumas, where floodwaters reached up to 15 feet.

Mudslides and flooding have also closed several interstates and highways, including Interstates 5 and 90, US Routes 2 and 12, state Routes 6, 181 and 508, and Highways 2, 12, 20, 90 and 97. Amtrak was forced to suspend train service between Seattle and Vancouver.

Numerous other routes had one-way closings to allow residents to use both sides of roads and highways to evacuate.

One worker told the WSWS, "Here in Whatcom County, the Nooksack has overflowed affecting parts of Ferndale and some smaller communities. Residents were evacuated before the city of Sumas flooded again, and the border crossing there was closed. Sumas has had major flooding incidents repeatedly during similar events in the past, notably in 2020 and 2021, where many residents lost everything.

"There are several reports of water over roadways, particularly low-lying areas. Iowa Street in Bellingham is infamous for flooding whenever it rains heavy. (It's something of a local joke.) There are also reports of flooding on Meridian Street/SR 539 which blocked the I-5 ramp access there."

The breach of the Desimone levee is characteristic of the lack of maintenance of local infrastructure. Damage to the levee was documented in 2014, but permanent repairs were not scheduled until 2031 while tens of thousands went unprotected from severe flooding. King County's 2006 Flood Hazard Management Plan identified $335 million in critical repairs needed for aging levees. Nineteen years later, much of that work remains undone.

The region's 500-plus flood protection facilities, many built more than 50 years ago, now safeguard mostly commercial centers, and even those have received only patchwork maintenance. In 2009, Washington requested $15.5 million in emergency funding from the Army Corps of Engineers for the Howard Hanson Dam after defects were exposed. Despite a one-in-three chance of catastrophic flooding and $30 billion in economic exposure, the Corps denied

the request. Only after congressional intervention did $44 million arrive two years later.

The impact of this neglect has been disastrous on the working class. Numerous reports have emerged of residents who will be forced to pay tens of thousands of dollars or more out-of-pocket for repairs. Thousands have been forced to pay hundreds or thousands of dollars on hotels or short-term rentals, while others are not able to continue working. And while FEMA's emergency assistance will cover part of the damage to homes, it can take months for those hit to be reimbursed, and it does not cover temporary housing, food or lost wages for individuals.

A significant part of the cost forced on workers is the conscious refusal by insurance companies to insure against floods. Only 36,000 flood insurance policies exist in Washington, while more than 2 million residents live in flood-vulnerable areas. The National Flood Insurance Program's maximum coverage of $250,000 has remained unchanged since 1994. Average annual premiums of $936 deter many working families from purchasing coverage, while standard policies explicitly exclude flood damage.

The official response has been anemic, from both the state Democratic administration and the Trump administration at the federal level. Reports indicate that only 300 state National Guard have been deployed to aid in disaster relief, with another 150 sent from California. Mount Vernon Fire Chief Bryan Harris acknowledged the inadequacy in a comment to *Cascadia Daily News*, stating, "We know that that is not enough for everybody."

For its part, the Trump administration has gutted FEMA, cutting its staffing by 9.5 percent this year and canceling the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities program. In addition, the administration has proposed quadrupling the damage threshold for public assistance, which would exclude many smaller communities.

The floods and landslides have also come amid the passage of a record $1 trillion military budget with mass bipartisan support. Compared to the sums allocated for flood prevention, it is clear that the destruction of human life is on the order of 1,000 times more important for the American bourgeoisie than projects to preserve life.

Similar to the floods in Texas over the summer and the recent floods in Sri Lanka, the floods across the Pacific Northwest are not a natural disaster but the direct result of all aspects of capitalist society being geared toward the accumulation of private profit and the waging of war both abroad and at home.

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