The Nepal-China flood, climate change and the fight for socialism

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In the span of a few hours on Wednesday morning, a cascade of water and rock swept through Nepal along a 72-kilometer (45-mile) stretch of the Trishuli and Bhote Koshi rivers, producing a flash flood that destroyed and severely damaged dozens of towns in Nepal's Rasuwa and Nuwakot districts. The Gyirong Port crossing between Nepal and Tibet, once the region's major trade and tourism checkpoint, was wiped out.

Authorities have confirmed at least 389 dead in Nepal and 3 in China, with a further 910 and 558 missing, respectively. Numerous harrowing videos have emerged on social media of people attempting to flee the deluge—described as "liquid concrete" by hydrologists—with many tragically perishing.

"Till early this morning it was very scenic around here… There was a hydropower station and plant. Everything has been swept away," Rajendra Poudel, a healthcare worker in the town of Betrawati, told *Al Jazeera* Thursday. "This is heartbreaking; I am out of words."

The flood buried many of the villages of Timure and Syapru Besi in Rasuwa and Betrawati in Nuwakot and destroyed at least 19 bridges and some 40 kilometers (25 miles) of roads. The Nepal Electricity Authority estimated that 430 megawatts of generating capacity had been knocked out. On Thursday, Chinese authorities warned that a new lake, pooling behind the landslide debris, could burst and send a second surge down the same valleys.

Satellite imagery suggests that the immediate cause of the disaster is a mass of ice and rock that broke off a glacier-covered slope in Tibet, producing an avalanche that was large enough to be detected as a 5.2 magnitude seismic event in Germany and by the United States Geological Survey. The social catastrophe that has resulted, however, is the latest consequence of the refusal of the world's capitalist governments to halt climate change or prepare their populations for the inevitable deadly consequences.

Studies of high elevation regions such as the Himalayas, including the border of Nepal and Tibet that was flooded, have shown for years that such areas are particularly vulnerable to global warming. Small amounts of warming melt snow, the exposed rock then absorbs more sunlight, producing more warming, melting more snow and so on in a positive feedback loop.

The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), an intergovernmental scientific institution, reported in 2023 that Himalayan glaciers disappeared 65 percent faster in 2011-2020 than in the previous decade. A similar study from ICIMOD in March of this year concluded that Himalayan glaciers have an ice loss rate double what it was in 2000. The report warned just five months ago that "This isn't a distant problem; it's a crisis unfolding in real-time, with new disasters every summer and monsoon."

The response of the world's governments to this particular aspect of the climate crisis has been paltry. In July 2025 the Green Climate Fund (GCF) approved a program to protect 2.4 million Nepalis from glacial floods, including draining four high-risk lakes and building early-warning systems. The budget for this project is $49.9 million over seven years, roughly 30 minutes of US military spending at the rate of the $839 billion appropriations bill the House of Representatives passed in January.

Every other initiative to fight climate change is equally impotent, subordinated to the drive for corporate profit and the escalating resources redirected toward war. The Trump administration withdrew from the Paris Accord on January 27 and issued a rescission on the Environmental Protection Agency's ruling on greenhouse gases on February 12, bragging of "the single largest deregulatory action in U.S. history."

The US did not even attend last November's United Nations climate summit (COP30) in Belém, Brazil, and the proposal for a roadmap to phase out fossil fuels and limit carbon emissions was blocked by China, India, Saudi Arabia and Russia. In Europe, climate pledges are being abandoned wholesale as the imperialist powers continue to rearm in preparation for a direct confrontation with Russia.

The warming of the Himalayas is happening in concert with broader global temperature trends, all of which are

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rising. On August 22, four days before the flood, the European Union's Copernicus Climate Change Service recorded the highest daily global ocean surface temperature ever measured, 21.1 degrees Celsius (70 degrees Fahrenheit), surpassing the record set in March 2024. It is also significant that the reading came in late August, when the oceans are typically cooling.

Earlier this year in July, Western Europe registered average temperatures 2.79 degrees C (5 degrees F) above the historical average, causing wildfires that drove more than 375,000 people from their homes in France and Spain. That same month, forest fires in Canada and the US Midwest blanketed much of the eastern half of North America in toxic smoke, with the air quality index reaching above 900 in Duluth, Minnesota, and above 500 in major metropolitan areas like Detroit.

And on August 13, the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) reported a greater than 90 percent chance that a very strong El Niño will develop this fall and winter and a 69 percent chance that it will be the strongest ever recorded, causing an even sharper spike in global warming.

That so many disasters have occurred and will continue to occur is an indictment of the capitalist system. One of the earliest well-known warnings of the dangers of global warming was given by the late astronomer Carl Sagan, who warned in 1985 that there was already "handwriting on the wall" and that a vast international mobilization had to be undertaken in order to prevent the worst of the impacts from being felt.

Humanity is today living in the world in which those warnings, and those of the vast majority of scientists on the planet, have been actively ignored. Workers and toilers every day face more devastating storms, longer heat waves, dryer droughts and seemingly nonstop wildfires. Coral reefs are dying, threatening significant parts of Earth's food chain. Glacial melting and sea level rise is slowly inundating every coastal city on the planet, potentially displacing one-third of the world's population.

The past 41 years have also demonstrated that humanity has never possessed greater capacity to understand and master these natural processes. Satellites map every glacier in the Himalayas and the world over; AI and supercomputers model the climate decades ahead; vast improvements in solar, wind, tidal, geothermal and other alternative forms of energy have made the need for coal, oil and natural gas theoretically obsolete; developments in new superconductive materials are poised to drastically reduce the need to generate so much electricity in the first place.

But the application of this capacity and the reorganization of social and economic life on an international scale on such a basis is blocked at every turn by private profit and the division of the world into rival nation-states. As such, the solution to climate change is not a scientific or technical question, but a *political* and sharply *revolutionary* question.

Frederick Engels wrote in *The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man* that "for each such victory" over nature, "nature takes its revenge on us," and that controlling the consequences of production "requires something more than mere knowledge. It requires a complete revolution in our hitherto existing mode of production, and simultaneously a revolution in our whole contemporary social order."

The same can be said now with even more force. No capitalist government proposes any serious solution to climate change because it cannot be done while economic life is subordinated to the material interests of the financial oligarchy. Nor can any confidence be placed in the programs of the Green parties and pseudo-left organizations, all of which accept the current social order as one that needs merely to be reformed.

As such, the solution to climate change is the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism itself. This must be carried out by the working class, which is the only social force that is international in composition and thus capable of making the necessary transformation of the energy, agriculture and logistics industries to abate, reverse and control climate change.

The International Committee of the Fourth International, the Socialist Equality Parties and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) fight to mobilize workers on this basis and for the expropriation of the financial oligarchy and the reorganization of world economy on socialist foundations.

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