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Extreme weather, climate change and the case for socialism

The flooding disaster in Humphreys County, Tennessee over the weekend has so far killed at least 21 people, including two toddlers, with another 45 still missing. The flash floods were the result of a storm which dropped 17 inches of rain on the region on Saturday evening, likely a new state record.



Firefighters work at the scene of forest fire near Kyuyorelyakh village at Gorny Ulus area, west of Yakutsk, in Russia Thursday, Aug. 5, 2021. (AP Photo/Ivan Nikiforov)

Early imagery shows whole communities devastated, with scores of houses simply gone as if a hurricane, tornado or wildfire had blown through. Rescue efforts are currently underway from multiple agencies, including the Tennessee Emergency Management

Agency, the state Department of Transportation, the Tennessee National Guard, the Tennessee Highway Patrol and the Tennessee Department of Health.

The deadly floods in Tennessee, as well as those that have occurred in Michigan, are not, however, just natural disasters. As with wildfires, hurricanes and polar vortexes, floods are becoming more frequent and severe “extreme weather” events because of human-induced climate change. This causal relationship was definitely established by the most recent report from the United Nations Panel on Climate Change, which declared that, “It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land,” which are in turn connected to “observed changes in extremes such as heatwaves, heavy precipitation, droughts, and tropical cyclones.”

The same report also directly linked climate change to specific recent events, including floods across Europe, wildfires in the western United States, droughts in various parts of the world and stronger hurricanes, such as Hurricane Henri which made landfall in Rhode Island on Sunday and has caused power outages across New England.

Other recent extreme weather events linked to climate change include:

- A record heat wave in Greece which reached 116.8 degrees Fahrenheit and which triggered multiple wildfires across the country that have so far killed 2 people, injured 20 others, burned down several homes and an estimated 482 square miles, and forced the evacuation of thousands. Similar to the UN, the World Meteorological Organization has linked the wildfires to the impacts of climate change and global warming.
- Mountains in the Tizi Ouzou region of Algeria have been scorched by more than 100 forest fires in the past two weeks, with heat from the fires reportedly washing over mountain ranges. Hundreds of square miles have burned and the towns of Larbaâ Nath Irathen, Beni Douala and Aït Mesbah have been turned to ash, causing more damage than all the fires from 2008 to 2020 combined. Ninety people have so far died fighting the flames.
- Wildfires in Bolivia have burned more than 580 square miles of land in the country’s Amazon and Chaco regions. The areas include large populations of South America’s indigenous peoples as well as a variety of plant and animal life. The region is also one of

the most important areas on the planet for capturing and storing carbon from the atmosphere, one of the many natural processes that reduce the amount of freely circulating greenhouse gases.

- The largest wildfires on Earth are currently in Siberia, where hundreds of fires have burned more than 62,300 square miles of land since the beginning of the year, an amount comparable to the catastrophic 2019-20 Australian bushfire season. The fires have been in part exacerbated by record high temperatures reaching 118 degrees Fahrenheit over the summer. Smoke from the fires has blanketed the sky for 2,000 miles from east to west and 2,500 miles from north to south, reaching all the way to Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia, as well as for the first time reaching the North Pole.

- Heavy rainfall in Turkey's Black Sea region caused flash flooding that has so far killed at least 82 people. These deaths follow the July floods in Europe, during which more than 230 people were killed across Germany, Belgium, Romania, Italy and Austria. Further severe and deadly floods have occurred in China, the United States, India, Pakistan, Japan, Afghanistan and New Zealand, which have killed thousands and impacted the lives of hundreds of millions.

In another indication of the world's changing climate, rain fell on Greenland's summit on Saturday for the first time since records began. Temperatures rose above freezing for the third time in less than a decade, allowing the abnormal rainfall to occur. The rain follows a significant melting event in July when more than 8.5 billion tons of surface ice melted in a single day. That rate of melting is similar to what occurred in 2019, when a hot spring and July heat wave caused Greenland to lose 532 billion tons of ice in a single year, causing global sea levels to permanently rise by 1.5 millimeters.

Many other metrics of the dangers posed by climate change could be mentioned. As the geographical breadth of the above examples indicates, there is no country that isn't experiencing the deleterious effects of extreme weather events caused by climate change.

The scope of the disasters also exposes the bankruptcy of capitalism and its complete inability to deal in any meaningful way with the ongoing climate crisis.

In a 1982 internal memo that was “given wide circulation to Exxon management,” it was made clear that global temperatures would increase sharply as more CO₂ was released into the atmosphere. The memo at the time predicted an increase of atmospheric greenhouse gases and global temperatures seen today and also predicted that global temperatures would exceed an increase of 1.5 degrees Celsius before the middle of this century and 2 degrees Celsius sometime around 2060.

Similar reports had been shown to the administrations of Democrat Jimmy Carter and Republican Ronald Reagan, which warned in the 1980s that the increase of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere as a result of burning greenhouse gases and resultant increase in global temperatures would eventually cause catastrophic environmental consequences for the world’s population, such as glaciers melting, sea levels rising and whole coastal regions being submerged under tens of meters of water.

More recently, the 2017 Carbon Majors report showed that just 100 corporations worldwide now produce about 90 percent of all global greenhouse gas emissions each year, and are responsible about half of all greenhouse gas emissions caused by human activity since the industrial revolution. That same presentation also noted that if the trend in fossil fuel extraction and release continues for the next quarter century, global average temperatures would be on track to reach an increase of 4 degrees Celsius by the year 2100.

Such a sharp rise in global temperatures, for which the world is currently on track, would be only the precursors of much more devastating storms, longer heat waves, dryer droughts and nonstop wildfires. Along with sea level rise and drowning every coastal city on the planet, coral reefs around the world would likely die off, eliminating a cornerstone of the food chain and threatening the survivors of the mass flooding with mass starvation.

There is also the increasing danger that Earth’s climate will enter a qualitatively different stage, one where the positive feedback effects of the current stage of global warming ultimately decouple Earth’s climate from human industrial activity. Under these conditions, other geophysical processes such as the mass release of methane from permafrost melting threaten to warm the planet far more than even the burning of fossil fuels is capable. Such a scenario would be exponentially more difficult for modern scientific techniques to contain.

For the capitalist class, however, stopping civilization-ending cataclysms is far less important than preserving their profits. As has been the case for decades, ExxonMobil, BP and other major fossil fuel corporations, as well as the hedge funds and Wall Street banks that own their stocks, are most concerned that coal, oil and gas continues to be mined and sold to further enrich themselves and their fellow oligarchs. If Earth will be poisoned and burned in that pursuit, so be it.

A parallel must be drawn to the coronavirus pandemic. Just as the world's politicians and media figures have either ignored or actively sought to spur on a deadly contagion to protect corporate profits, to the tune of at least 4.4 million dead, they are actively driving the destruction of the environment. The objective need to increase the rate of profits drives the accelerating exploitation of the world's resources and has led directly to the current (and future) ecological disasters.

Workers and young people must draw the lessons of the sustained inaction that has caused the ongoing crisis. The struggle to stop climate change—like the struggle against the pandemic and the threat of war—must become political. It requires the revolutionary mobilization of the international working class against capitalism. It requires that workers understand that their social interests are objectively and diametrically opposed to those of the capitalists and the private ownership of the means of production. It requires a fight for the socialist transformation of society.

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