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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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Roger Jordan
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“Catastrophic” flooding cuts transportation links, forces thousands to evacuate homes in British Columbia

Floodwaters described as “once in a century” and “catastrophic” have engulfed wide swathes of southwestern British Columbia since Sunday night as the result of a record rainfall, attributable to an “atmospheric river.” Many Fraser Valley communities saw a month’s worth of precipitation fall in just two days.

Thousands of people have been forced to flee their homes, and damage to highway and rail networks has left Greater Vancouver, with a population of over 2.5 million, effectively cut off from the rest of Canada by land.

BC Premier John Horgan declared a 14-day state of emergency at a press conference Wednesday afternoon, noting that he expects the death toll to rise over the coming days. Horgan also requested federal assistance from the Canadian Armed Forces to provide services to thousands of evacuees and restore drinking water to communities whose supplies have been contaminated by the floods.



Abbotsford, BC inundated by flood waters on Tuesday (Credit: City of Abbotsford)

The floods are the product of climate change, which is at the root of a series of extreme weather events and other disasters that have devastated western Canada, and especially BC, in recent months.

An unprecedented heat dome in late June led to the deaths of over 600 BC residents. High temperatures and drought subsequently contributed to one of the province's worst wildfire seasons ever. All of these natural disasters have been exacerbated by the utter failure of the provincial New Democratic Party and federal Liberal governments to take preventive measures and invest in crumbling infrastructure.

The current official death toll of one, a woman crushed in her car by a mudslide, is likely to increase considerably. Two other people are officially reported missing. Several areas of the province are only accessible by helicopter, making it likely that further casualties are yet to be discovered. Merritt (population 7,000) is largely underwater after authorities ordered all residents to leave because the town's water plant has been inundated with flood waters. A gas line providing heat to residents in Princeton was cut, with utility FortisBC declaring that it will not be up and running again before the weekend.

Although the exact number of evacuees across the province is unknown, at least 20 evacuation centres have been set up. The city of Hope is hosting 1,100 evacuees alone.

The four highways linking the Lower Mainland to the BC Interior have been blocked by landslides, which trapped over 270 people in their cars Monday night. The provincial New Democratic Party government announced late Tuesday that a lane for emergency services traffic was open on Highway 7, which runs parallel to the Trans-Canada Highway. Two rail lines used to transport goods to the Port of Vancouver have also been severed, with one blocked by a derailed CN Rail train. While CN Rail and CP Rail say they hope to re-establish services within days, some of the highway damage could take months to repair. Pictures are already circulating of empty shelves in supermarkets across the province, driven primarily by panic buying.



A woman cleans out her flood-damaged home Wednesday, Nov. 17, 2021, in Sumas, Wash. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson)

City authorities in Abbotsford, which lies in the Fraser Valley about 70 kilometers east of Vancouver, issued an urgent evacuation order late Tuesday for residents in Sumas Prairie, a major agricultural area close to the US border. The low-lying region is threatened with inundation due to the imminent failure of the Barrowtown pump station, which is struggling to keep floodwaters from the Fraser River out of the Sumas Lake Canal. The pump station would most likely have already failed were it not for the efforts of 300 local volunteers and emergency services personnel, who built a 25-meter-long dam to protect the site.

Over 180 people were rescued overnight by air and water from Sumas Prairie. The region, where at least 300 people remained stranded as of Wednesday morning, accounts for about half of BC's dairy and poultry products.

Gareth, a farmer from BC, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "In September, we get on average two inches of rain, but this year we got six. The west coast of Canada will have drier summers and wetter winters due to the ice melting, jet streams slowing, and weather systems not moving through because of our ever-increasing emissions of green house gases and the resulting hotter temperatures.

"That was certainly the case as we experienced an unprecedented heat dome with record highs. This fall, in my 50 years, I have never seen rain this hard or for this long. As a farmer, these extremes are going to make growing food much more difficult."

The floods and landslides were triggered by unprecedented rainfall that began on Saturday. Some areas, including Hope, recorded as much rain within three days as they typically see throughout the entire month of November. In Vancouver, a sea barge ran aground at English Bay due to high winds.

The unprecedented rainfall was caused by an "atmospheric river," a dense column of water vapour that carries moisture from the tropics towards the poles. As it travels, the moisture falls as rain. Although atmospheric rivers are not unprecedented, climate change is increasing their sizes and making them more likely to dump large quantities of water over brief periods of time.

Criticism of the NDP government is building, which failed to send out an emergency warning to residents in the affected areas despite forecasts having projected the impending storm. BC is the only Canadian province never to have used the Alert Ready system, a nationwide emergency service that allows governments to send messages directly to cell phones. The Northwest Territories, which has less than 1 percent of BC's population, has used the Alert Ready system four times this year alone, including for flash floods. All that BC Public Safety Minister Mike Farnworth could offer as an excuse Monday was, "It is in place for tsunamis. We have publicly said it's in place for next season's fire season."

Beyond the lack of a coordinated response in the face of an “atmospheric river” that was forecasted, scientists have attacked the political establishment for its failure to listen to their repeated warnings about the likelihood of such extreme events becoming ever more common.

Peter Wood, a scientist who produced a recent report on the link between clearcut logging and community damage due to floods and wildfires, told the *Guardian*, “This is exactly what the best available science has predicted for years. We know the outcome when you log steep slopes...You reach sort of a tipping point where the forest is no longer able to provide that moderating service of controlling flow of water.” Wood added, “Over the last couple days, I’ve been looking at the areas that have been particularly hard hit, and it happens to coincide with some of the communities that have been logged the heaviest.”

Repeated warnings have also gone unheeded regarding the government’s failure to take precautionary measures against wildfires and the risk of flooding. Controlled burns of shrubs and vegetation can help limit forest fires and conserve older, larger trees, which can in turn act as a barrier against water flowing off slopes. But many of these programs were slashed during the austerity budgets imposed by the BC Liberal governments of Gordon Campbell and Christy Clark.

The NDP, which returned to power in 2017, has retained and even boasted about its commitment to a no less rigorous regime of fiscal discipline. The NDP’s callous indifference towards the plight faced by the population due to increasingly erratic weather patterns was underscored during last summer’s heat dome, when Premier Horgan notoriously declared that the hundreds of deaths were “a part of life” and that everyone ought to take “personal responsibility” when extreme weather events occur.

The fate of the area around Lytton, a small town in the Interior that made headlines around the world during the summer when it was almost burned to the ground by a wildfire, illustrates the close connection between out-of-control forest fires and an increased danger of flooding. A section of the Trans-Canada Highway was washed away by the Thompson River east of Lytton Monday.

The refusal to invest in basic infrastructure and preventative measures is being graphically exposed by the disaster unfolding near Abbotsford. The danger posed by flooding to the

province's prime agricultural region was identified in a March 2021 report from the Fraser Basin Council, which warned that the dyke system protecting the Sumas Prairie from the Fraser River was at risk of failure. The Council estimated the cost of an inundation of the region to be anywhere from \$20 billion to \$30 billion.

The devastation wrought across Canada's third most populous province over recent days, and the crisis it is producing for the supply of foodstuffs and other basic necessities, provides a dire warning as to the urgency of a comprehensive international program to tackle climate change, and invest in infrastructure to protect people in Canada and around the world from ever more extreme natural disasters.

The last year alone has witnessed horrendous flooding in Europe, which claimed over 200 lives in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands; massive wildfires in Siberia which sent smoke to the North Pole for the first time on record; devastating flooding in New York City and New Jersey that drowned workers in their apartments; and the Texas winter storm which knocked out the state's power grid and killed hundreds more.

But the ruling elite in every country has shown itself entirely unwilling and incapable of taking any measures that challenge the prerogative of the super-rich and big business to acquire vast profits. The globally coordinated strategy necessary to tackle climate change is inconceivable under conditions in which the ruling class in every country stokes geopolitical rivalries and military tensions, as was shown at the recently-concluded COP26 summit in Glasgow.

Everything depends on the development of a mass political movement of the working class in Canada, the United States, and internationally to enforce a science-based and globally-coordinated policy to combat climate change and secure safe living conditions for all.

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