

Catastrophic floods and forest fires kill dozens and leave thousands homeless in Chile

Mauricio Saavedra
31 August 2023

Catastrophic floods have again impacted the central-southern region of Chile, leaving three dead and thousands homeless. For the second time since June this year an “atmospheric river”—a narrow corridor of concentrated moisture in the atmosphere—unloaded for six uninterrupted days over the regions of Valparaíso, Santiago, O’Higgins, Ñuble, Maule and Biobío, a stretch 700 kilometers long.

To this calamity is added the forest fires of last January in the same regions of Maule, Ñuble, Biobío as well as La Araucanía, which claimed the lives of 26 people, destroyed 2,450 homes and burnt through 426,000 hectares dominated by agribusinesses and pine and eucalyptus plantations.

Contributing to the situation are record high temperatures caused by climate change and the onset of the El Niño weather phenomenon. Warmer temperatures during the southern hemisphere’s current winter season raised to 3,000 meters the zero-degree isotherm, the altitude at which it is 0°C on the Andes mountain ranges that run the length of the country.

This has the effect of precipitation falling as rain where snow would normally have fallen. The excess water on mountainous terrain generates a runoff that travels at an extraordinary velocity, dragging along everything in its path and causing landslides and flooding of the river systems.

On August 21, the day President Gabriel Boric declared a state of catastrophe in the four southern rural regions, more than 26,000 people were cut off from basic services, 34,000 had to be evacuated and 38,000 were left without electricity. By August 23 the floods had claimed three lives.

By August 24, 204 homes were completely destroyed, 10,613 had major damage, 27,506 had minor damage and 16,893 homes were still under evaluation. This is on top of more than 5,400 homes destroyed or damaged last

June. Moreover, according to the National Disaster Prevention and Response System, the floods caused infrastructure damage to 28 bridges, 522 roads, nine medical facilities, and 312 educational facilities.

In one incident in Valparaíso a 17-story apartment building had to be evacuated when a 30-meter sinkhole opened five meters away, swallowing part of the road. Torrential rains created a landslide next to a complex of expensive condominiums that was built in the 2000s after developers demanded they be allowed to construct on a nature sanctuary comprised of dunes.

The builder, Besalco construction, was quick to deflect responsibility, claiming that structurally the building was sound and reiterating claims made by authorities that “the collapse of the land adjacent to the building was a result of the failure of the rainwater collector located in the public road, which was designed and built by a third party... as part of the urbanization of a large sector.”

Mónica Seins, a pensioner who was forced to indefinitely evacuate her apartment, responded to the construction company: “They are not responsible because the structure of the building is not damaged, obviously, of course, it is not damaged yet, but there is no street, so who builds where there is no street, how can they wash their hands, I mean, that is what we have come to in this country.”

In a similar incident in the Maule Region, 440 houses built less than 50 meters from the banks of the Guaiquillo River were inundated with mud and debris, forcing the residents to abandon their homes.

Again, the construction company, Constructora Galilea—which belongs to the family of the senator representing the region, Rodrigo Galilea (National Renewal)—denied any responsibility stating that the project complied with building regulations and had authorization from the municipality and other authorities. All true. In 2011, Galilea, then as head of the regional

government, rubber-stamped changes to the regulatory plans made three years earlier that allowed for the construction of houses on what was previously a zone prone to flooding.

According to *Business News Americas* the June and August floods are estimated to have caused US\$900 million in infrastructure and housing damage—almost annulling the financing and construction carried out as part of the government’s Emergency Housing Project, which has been mired in a corruption scandal. A staggering 650,000 families are officially without access to housing.

Meanwhile US \$1.1 billion in damage has been caused to the agricultural sector still reeling from the June floods. Some 274,000 hectares of arable land were flooded. Here Boric was quicker to come to the rescue, decreeing a “State of Agricultural Emergency” to free state resources for agribusiness and the wine industries.

For good measure, Chile continues to be “the country with the greatest water crisis in the entire western hemisphere (with) about 80 percent of its territory affected by drought for a decade and a half,” reported *CNN Chile* last week.

It continued: “Experts blame the lack of water on the scarcity of rainfall, but also on the water ownership regime, 80 percent of which is in private hands, mainly in the hands of large agricultural, mining and energy companies.”

In 1980 Gen. Pinochet enshrined the privatization of water in the constitution and adopted a market-based allocation system to sell off the nation’s water. Privatization took off under the civilian center-left administration of Eduardo Frei (1994-2000) who privatized the sanitation system and cleared the way for international firms to own water rights. By 2018, the ultra-right billionaire demagogue, president Sebastian Piñera, was auctioning off rivers.

Today water rights for consumption use are held by big capital in the agricultural and forestry sector (77 percent), the mining sector (13 percent), the industrial sector (7 percent) and the health sector (3 percent). Eighty-one percent of the water rights that are not used for consumption are controlled by an Italian company. Moreover drinking water supplies—for which the population pays the highest rates in Latin America—are owned by the transnational groups Suez, Agrab and Marubeni and by the Ontario teachers’ pension fund.

Boric came to power on the promise that this would all dramatically change under his Apruebo Dignidad

administration: “Chile will bury neo-liberalism” he claimed during the 2021 presidential election campaign. The pseudo-left president in particular trumpeted his environmentalist credentials and on the critical water question had this to say:

“Water must be guaranteed for everyone as a human right. Our commitment as a government is to ensure the water supply for thousands of families that today live in precariousness and to put an end to the privileges of those who monopolize it. For a better Chile with free water!”

Of course, he forgot about this promise as he has every other. But here is the nub of the matter: even if a bourgeois government proposed a plan that in any way impacted on private property, it would encounter the wrath of vast transnational corporations and their financial backers who own not only the water but the land, the natural riches, the means of production and the material wealth created by the collective labor of the working class.

Modern science, technology and technique are more than up to the task of dealing with floods, forest fires, drought, pandemics and all the other calamities afflicting modern civilization. The fundamental question is, which class controls these products of social man’s labor and knowledge.

As the WSWs recently noted “the capitalist profit system, which organizes society on the basis of the self-interest of the capitalist class, is organically incapable of the massive level of social planning and organization necessary to address the climate crisis” or any other fundamental question.

The task of securing the conditions for the socialist planning of the world’s economic resources and the reorganizing of society on a rational basis, falls on the shoulders of the international working class who must first wrest power from the bourgeoisie and overthrow its state, ending the subordination of economic life to private profit and the division of the world into rival nation-states.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact