

Southern Brazil faces humanitarian crisis after historic flooding

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Since the end of April, Rio Grande do Sul has been facing the devastating effects of historic rains and floods that have hit practically this entire southernmost Brazilian state of almost 11 million inhabitants. A series of climatic factors, mainly those associated with global warming produced by capitalism and intensified last year by El Niño, are behind one of Brazil's greatest climatic tragedies, one of the latest extreme weather events in the world.

Record temperatures in the South Atlantic Ocean have increased the frequency and intensity of weather systems that bring cold and humidity to Rio Grande do Sul. Between April and May, a sequence of these events was prevented from spreading to the rest of Brazil due to a warm air mass in the Midwest and Southeast of Brazil associated with record temperatures for this time of year. The humidity brought to Rio Grande do Sul by weather systems from the South Atlantic met with that coming from the Amazon region in northern Brazil, which condensed into record rainfall in the state.

In two cities in Rio Grande do Sul, Fontoura Xavier and Caxias do Sul, it rained 778 mm and 694 mm, respectively, between April 22 and May 6. This is equivalent to the average rainfall for these cities for the first five months of the year, when it rains the most in Rio Grande do Sul.

As a result, entire towns have been flooded. According to the Civil Defense bulletin of May 27, 94 percent of the state's municipalities (469 out of 497) were hit, affecting more than 2 million people. Already, 169 deaths have been confirmed, and 56 people are still missing. More than 800 people were injured.

The floods destroyed much of the infrastructure in Rio Grande do Sul. Bridges were washed away, and 100 highways were wholly or partially blocked, making it difficult not only to rescue and move residents, but also to transport medicines and food.

The health system had around 100 hospitals affected, 17 of which had to suspend their services entirely. According to a May 20 report in the daily *Folha de São Paulo*, a single hospital, the Canoas Emergency Room, estimates a loss of R\$35 million (US\$6.7 million), which includes furniture, information technology, plumbing, suction and oxygen tubes, among other equipment.

The state education system had 40 percent of its schools affected in some way. The electricity, water and sewage systems have been severely damaged. In the state capital of Porto Alegre, one water treatment plant was destroyed and is not expected to start working again, while the other five are operating at reduced capacity.

It is difficult to find drinking water and other essential supplies. Clothing, blankets, and hygiene items reach the victims thanks to donations sent from all over the country. On May 18, the daily *Correio Braziliense* reported that the mayors of the capital and five

other municipalities in the metropolitan region warned of the risk of food shortages and asked the federal and state governments to create humanitarian corridors for basic foodstuffs.

Salgado Filho International Airport in Porto Alegre has had its operations suspended indefinitely and is expected to remain closed for up to six months. The state's three ports, responsible for connecting 30 percent of the state's gross domestic product to international markets, have also been affected, and so far only one has resumed operations.

It was only 20 days after the heavy rains began that the water began to recede in the capital and other municipalities. But the situation remains critical in several areas that are still flooded, and throughout the state there are still around 56,000 people living in shelters and 580,000 displaced (in the homes of friends or relatives), according to the Civil Defense bulletin of May 27.

Rio Grande do Sul's secretary for Social Development has already stated that some of the 770 shelters serving people displaced by the rain will remain in place for months.

The capitalist politics of climate disasters

The tragedy in Rio Grande do Sul comes amid an intensification of climatic disasters in Brazil, further exacerbating the enormous social inequality in one of the most unequal countries in the world. Approximately 16.6 million of the country's 215 million inhabitants live in favelas, shanty towns associated with precarious conditions and unsafe housing that are more susceptible to such disasters.

Just to mention the last few years, between the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2023, major floods and landslides were recorded in the south of Bahia, the north of Minas Gerais, the mountainous region of Rio de Janeiro, the capital of Pernambuco and the coast of São Paulo. The deadliest rainfall disaster to date was in January 2011, in the mountainous region of Rio de Janeiro, with landslides and flooding that killed 918 people.

While many coastal states in Brazil are suffering from increased rainfall and its consequences, countless other regions of the country are facing record droughts. In 2021, the Midwest and Southeast experienced their longest drought in 91 years, while last year the Amazon region faced its worst drought in 120 years.

Rio Grande do Sul itself was still recovering from floods that had occurred months earlier. In June 2023, the state was devastated by an extratropical cyclone, which killed 16 people and left more than 7,000

homeless. Just three months later, in September 2023, another 54 people died in yet another disaster, until then considered the biggest in the history of Rio Grande do Sul. And again in November, after a large volume of rain, five people died and at least 28,000 had to leave their homes.

However, the most recent flood disaster in Rio Grande do Sul was the biggest ever recorded in the state and, in terms of the extent and duration of the damage, one of the biggest in the country's history.

In all these environmental disasters, the ruling class, through its governments and the press, has tried to blame the supposedly unexpected volume of rain and irregular construction. But this misleading version of reality has been debunked as quickly as the rise in water levels, which, in a few hours of rain, reached workers' necks.

Despite the governments' feigning surprise, there is no shortage of data from experts to prove that this was a tragedy foretold. A 2015 report by the now-defunct "Brazil 2040" program, commissioned by the government of Dilma Rousseff (Workers Party, PT) to forecast the effects of climate change on the country, already predicted above-normal rainfall in the South of the country and more acute droughts in the Northeast and Midwest.

"In Rio Grande do Sul, it hit me as soon as I saw the [current flood] maps from [climate agency] MetSul. They were visually similar to the forecasts made in the [Brazil 2040] program. It was frightening," commented Natalie Unterstell, who took part as program coordinator between 2013 and 2015, in an interview with BBC Brasil.

After the unprecedented impact seen in Rio Grande do Sul, sections of the ruling class have raised "concerns" about the environment, mainly because of the growing race for global energy transition, and blamed fascistic former president Jair Bolsonaro's scientific denialism for the tragedy.

The current governor of Rio Grande do Sul, Eduardo Leite, is part of a political generation of the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) that has renewed itself in a turn to the right. In the 2018 presidential election, he declared his support for Bolsonaro. In his first year in office, in 2019, Leite changed around 480 rules in the state's Environmental Code.

The changes were in line with the policy of the Bolsonaro government, which at the time had as its environment minister Ricardo Salles, who, during a ministerial meeting in 2020, advocated exploiting the media's focus on COVID-19 to change or remove environmental rules.

Representing 12.6 percent of the country's agricultural GDP, Rio Grande do Sul is among the top 10 agricultural producers in the country, accounting for 70 percent of national rice production, as well as meat, soybeans and corn. Last year, the sector earned more than R\$100 billion (US\$19 billion) in the state.

Associated with predatory exploitation of nature, with massive deforestation that contributes to flooding, agribusiness is seen as the biggest enemy of environmentalists. And although Bolsonaro is more open about the worst interests of this sector, it was during the PT governments, from 2003 to 2016, that agribusiness strengthened and expanded.

In the *Bom Dia, Presidente* show on May 7, the PT's President Lula da Silva expressed his pride in Brazilian agribusiness, emphasizing that there was no shortage of resources for the sector, having made R\$364 billion (R\$70 billion) available in the 2023/2024 Safra Plan and promising an equally generous 2024/2025 Plan.

The Climate Observatory (OC), a network of Brazilian environmental organizations, criticized the federal government in an

interview with BBC Brasil for not fighting hard enough for environmental issues.

"We've never had a Ministry of the Environment with so much support in the government. It's the first time a president has talked about zero deforestation and zero tolerance for deforestation. You have a minister of the economy who talks about the environment, a Ministry of Indigenous Peoples. ... But even so, things aren't moving as they should," said the OC's executive secretary, Marcio Astrini.

The climate crisis demands a response from the international working class

Far from being limited to Brazil, extreme weather events caused by global warming have been a global problem. In recent years, record heat waves have driven historic wildfires in Europe, North America, Africa and Chile. Record floods have hit Libya, Europe, China and Pakistan. In each of these events, millions of people were affected and continue to suffer the effects.

Like the criminal response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the drive toward a nuclear World War III, the climate crisis is a consequence of the capitalist system of production that prioritizes private profit over human life and the preservation of the planet itself. Systems for mitigating and preventing environmental disasters have been abandoned in the interests of austerity and militarization in one country after another.

And the effects of climate change are only just beginning. A report by the renowned National Institute for Space Research (INPE) published last November showed that rainfall in Rio Grande do Sul could increase by between 20 and 60 percent over the next 30 years, depending on the region of the state. Similar scenarios are predicted for every country in the world.

Addressing such foretold tragedies requires the expropriation of the world's ruling elite and the allocation of vast resources to coordinate a science-based global response to the climate crisis. This can only be achieved through worldwide action by the international working class.

The deaths and devastation in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul must not be forgotten, nor their lessons ignored. New disasters can only be fought with a conscious struggle for a reorganization of the world economy on a socialist and internationalist basis.



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