

California wildfires raise social questions

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Since October 21, huge wildfires—fueled by thick, dry foliage and fanned by hot Santa Ana winds blowing over the mountain passes linking the desert to the coastal plain—have incinerated about 750,000 acres of Southern California countryside, an area larger than the State of Rhode Island. As of October 31, 20 people were confirmed dead, including one firefighter, and over 3,500 structures, including 2,600 homes, have been destroyed. Losses are estimated at more than \$2 billion.

While large autumn wildfires are a frequent occurrence, the combined impact of this season's fires is the largest on record, and one of the most significant natural disasters in California history. During the worst days of the inferno, fires moved as much as 20 miles in a 24-hour period, a speed which made coordinated firefighting almost impossible.

On October 29 the winds returned to their normal on-shore pattern, reducing temperatures and increasing humidity. Measurable rain fell at Lindbergh Field in San Diego for the first time in six months. But full containment remains at least a week away. Although rain is expected through the weekend, the earliest projected control date is November 8.

The Cedar Fire in San Diego County, which consumed almost 300,000 acres, burned 1,500 homes and killed 14 people, is the single worst wildfire in California history. It wiped the 300-home lakeside resort community of Cuyamaca off the map and for several days threatened to overrun Julian, a quaint old mining town with a population of several thousand. Three other major fires in San Diego County, one of which crossed into Mexico and killed two people, scorched another 100,000 acres and 200 homes.

Almost as destructive has been the combined Old Fire and Grand Prix Fire in the forested mountains of San Bernardino County, and the Padua Fire in an adjacent part of Los Angeles County. These three wildfires combined to burn 200,000 acres and 1,000 homes, and kill two. 80,000 residents of the popular Lake Arrowhead and Big Bear resort areas have been evacuated for the better part of a week. Because of the rugged terrain, the Old Fire, the worst of the three, could take several weeks to extinguish completely.

The third major fire area, in Ventura County near the northern border of Los Angeles County, has burned about 175,000 acres and destroyed over 100 homes.

This catastrophe—like all large-scale disasters—vividly illustrates the complex interconnections which exist between

people's lives in our modern industrial society. The ripple effects of the wildfires on health, commerce, insurance, construction and the environment will be felt for years. Over the last week, the firestorms forced school and highway closures, and brought down power and telephone lines. On Monday a large number of scheduled airline flights were cancelled due to the effect on the fire on air traffic control radar. The Monday Night Football game was moved from San Diego to Tempe, Arizona, and those attending were asked to make contributions to the disaster relief fund instead of paying for tickets.

Large-scale calamities such as these wildfires bring out instinctive feelings of human solidarity and responsibility, the healthiest tendencies of the population, as people strive to cooperate, not for the selfish gains of the individual, but for the general good. The attitudes and behavior of the majority during such times contrast starkly with the glorification of the accumulation of wealth which dominates American capitalism when disaster is not knocking on the front door. The 15,000 firefighters who have struggled heroically to keep the fires away from populated areas have earned the sympathy and support of millions. Tragically, Steve Rucker, age 38, from Novato in Northern California, died October 29 near Julian, leaving a wife and two children. Three other firefighters were injured, one seriously, in that incident.

Generally ignored by the media is the fact that 4,000 of the front line firefighters are convicted felons presently serving sentences with the California Department of Corrections. Trained as firefighters in state forestry camps, these inmates are paid one dollar an hour to risk their lives suppressing wildfires. Additional firefighters are provided by the California Youth Authority and the local jail system. Under other conditions, right-wing politicians and their media acolytes would be advocating longer sentences, less rehabilitation and more Spartan living conditions for these men.

A significant amount of media coverage has been devoted to speculation over the causes of the fire. The Cedar Fire in San Diego appears to have been accidentally set by a lost hunter, but arson is suspected in San Bernardino. Whether the fires were ignited by disturbed or deranged individuals is a secondary question, however. Periodic wildfires—especially during early autumn, when the dry desert winds howl at the end of the arid summer season—are recognized as an element in the

ecology of Southern California's coastal plains and mountains. For the last century, humans extinguished most fires early to protect their property. The result has been an unnatural buildup of fuel, as the bushy growth of the chaparral becomes too dense. Gigantic catastrophic fires occur because of too much fire suppression, not too little. If fires are not allowed to burn, some other form of brush clearance must be utilized, but adequate funds for that purpose have not been appropriated.

The threat to life and property posed by large Southern California wildfires has increased dramatically over the last several decades with the construction of more housing in outlying areas which adjoin chaparral. While developers have raked in millions in profits, there have been many dire predictions about the lack of adequate infrastructure and land management to protect the new homes from catastrophe.

Moreover, federal land management resources tend to favor forests in the northwestern United States to protect profits generated by the logging industry. According to a report in *The Los Angeles Times*, of the \$53 million for hazardous-fuel reduction distributed to California's national forests in 2003, less than \$4 million went to the Cleveland, Angeles, San Bernardino and Los Padres national forests in Southern California, where the current wildfires are raging. Presently, the wildfires are being used to promote Bush's proposed legislation to increase lumber extraction in the name of fire protection, although the two matters are unrelated.

The Bush administration, in fact, bears direct responsibility for the ferocity of the wildfires in the San Bernardino National Forest. After several years of drought, which may be related to global warming, pine trees have become vulnerable to the bark beetle. There have been estimated to be between one and two million dead pine trees, many located near the Lake Arrowhead area, because of the combined effect of the drought and the bark beetle. Last April, California Governor Gray Davis asked the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for a \$450 million grant to remove the dead trees before they became tinder for forest fires. FEMA delayed acting on the request for six months, finally denying it October 24, during the early stages of the current fires. There is no question that the dead trees greatly multiplied the speed and intensity of the San Bernardino fires.

There have been significant criticisms regarding the resources available for containing the fires. Crews have been stretched thin by the number and size of the fires, and the firefighters are exhausted. National Guard troops, which have in the past provided valuable back up services, are not available due to their deployment in Iraq.

The state of California's firefighting resources has been crippled by the fiscal crisis that contributed to the demise of the Gray Davis administration. The state and local governments have fewer firefighters per capita in 2003 than 20 years ago.

As part of the budget agreement between the legislature and the governor this summer, the Department of Forestry and Fire

Protection lost \$50 million in funding, and was told to recapture the funds by charging fees to rural residents.

The biggest impact of the decline in manpower and financial support has been on fire prevention services, such as vegetation management. The state currently carries out only 20 percent of the prescribed burns and brush clearing called for in the goals set by the forestry department.

The lack of adequate fire-fighting resources has been most apparent in San Diego, which is the only large county in the state without a unified fire department. The area is well known for its "fiscal conservatism," and 32 of the last 50 San Diego ballot measures to raise money for fire protection have been defeated. Despite allowing new housing developments to abut miles of combustible chaparral, San Diego does not have a single water-dropping helicopter and one third fewer firefighters than the national average for large cities. The 12 deaths caused by the Cedar Fire were among residents in San Diego suburbs where no warning was given of the approaching flames.

Much of the money to be raised through the increase in the vehicle registration fee, which played a significant role in the Gray Davis recall, was dedicated to funding local public safety agencies. Incoming Republican governor Arnold Schwarzenegger vowed to eliminate the fee on his first day in office, a move which would force deep cuts in the budgets of fire departments throughout the state.

This year's Southern California wildfires provide yet another lesson on the effects of the anarchy of capitalist production and development, which subordinates rational planning and the allocation of resources to the profit drive of big business. The results are not only larger wildfires with more destruction of property, but also the greater devastation of individual lives, and the loss of their hopes and aspirations.



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