

The California wildfires and the American social crisis

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Once again, the world watches as a natural disaster in the United States threatens to become a social catastrophe. Once again, a million Americans are forced from their homes by a long-forecast calamity, with little planning or preparation by the local, state and federal governments. Once again, tens of thousands of refugees seek shelter at a football stadium in a major American city—this time, San Diego.

There are, of course, many differences between the experience of New Orleans two years ago and San Diego today. The urban core of San Diego and Los Angeles and their infrastructure remain intact. Utilities and other essential services are still in place, and the death toll is far lower. Property losses are estimated at several billion dollars, mainly from destroyed homes as well as crop damage in San Diego County; the damage from Hurricane Katrina was at least 50 times as great.

By all accounts, the response of emergency services, particularly the fire and rescue units, has been far more effective than during Hurricane Katrina, reflecting both the lesser scale of the disaster, the more developed social infrastructure of California (Louisiana being one of the poorest US states) and the lessons learned from the dismal response to the inundation of New Orleans. Perhaps the greatest difference in the response, however, is that the rich as well as the poor suffered in southern California, and they can call on society's resources far more easily.

As in Hurricane Katrina, the wildfires in southern California have laid bare the social crisis of a country riven by class inequality and imprisoned in an economic system dominated by the profit interests of a tiny minority of millionaires and billionaires. The richest country in the world, able to wage two wars simultaneously on the other side of the world, is incapable of providing adequate resources for so elementary a public service as firefighting.

Both the response of the Bush administration and the

media coverage of the wildfires reflect the impact of Katrina. The White House seeks to avoid another public exposure of its indifference to the suffering of ordinary Americans, and the media is more sensitive to the calamities of southern California, along with New York City one of the two media capitals of the United States.

Even here there is a social dimension: far more so than in New Orleans, where the devastation hit with particular force on the most impoverished layers, those without cars or otherwise unable to evacuate, the southern California wildfires have affected the rich as well as lower-income working people in equal measure. The homes destroyed include both those of multimillionaires and celebrities, seeking isolation and privacy, and those of working class families forced out to the fringes of the metropolitan areas in their search for affordable housing.

The media coverage, as with Katrina, covers up all essential political questions. There has been little or no reference to the impact of military deployment in Iraq on the disaster-response capabilities of the California National Guard, although National Guard officials warned of the problem less than six months ago.

According to a report in the May 11 issue of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "the California National Guard says equipment shortages could hinder the guard's response to a large-scale disaster. A dearth of equipment such as trucks and radios—caused in part by the war in Iraq—has state military officials worried they would be slow in providing help in the event of a major fire, earthquake or terrorist attack."

This report was published only days after a tornado destroyed a west Kansas town, and Governor Kathleen Sibelius complained that so much Kansas National Guard equipment was in Iraq that the disaster response efforts were being undermined. Lt. Col. John Siepmann of the California National Guard told the *Chronicle* that similar issues would arise in a major disaster there. "Our concern

is a catastrophic event,” he said. “You would see a less effective response.”

Among the equipment shortages were diesel generators (zero instead of 39 required), GPS devices (zero instead of 1,410), and 209 vehicles of all types, including 110 humvees and 63 military trucks. All this equipment was in either Iraq or Afghanistan, and thus unavailable for use in California.

The draw-down of National Guard equipment exacerbates the already depleted state of emergency response and firefighting services in the southern California area, long one of the most rapidly growing urban areas in the world.

In San Diego, for instance, the epicenter of the fires with an estimated 1,300 homes and 150 other buildings destroyed, \$1 billion in property damage and five people dead, there are only 975 firefighters. They must cover 330 square miles and protect 1.3 million residents, while in San Francisco, 1,600 firefighters protect 850,000 residents living in only 60 square miles.

University of California San Diego professor Steve Erie told the *Los Angeles Times* that the anti-tax, pro-business policy of local governments in the area had contributed to the disaster. “Developers own most of the city councils,” he said. “In Poway, in Escondido, what they do is put homeowners in harm’s way. They’re able to control zoning processes, and they’re frequently behind initiatives that say no new taxes, no new fire services. It’s insanity.”

The federal government has also failed to meet its responsibilities, despite the lessons of the 2003 wildfires that devastated much of San Diego County. Congress authorized up to \$760 million a year for efforts at “fuel reduction”—clearing and removing dead trees and underbrush that in drought conditions catch fire explosively. The Bush administration has chosen to seek appropriations for only about two thirds of that, \$500 million a year.

One major factor contributing to the fire disaster is global warming, which underlies the cycle of drought and high temperatures that have made the latest round of wildfires so much more challenging to the firefighters. According to federal statistics, seven of the ten busiest fire seasons in US history have been in the eight years since 1999. Even before the current outbreak, the total number of acres burned by US forest fires in 2007 stood at 8 million, compared to a ten-year average of 5.8 million acres. The 2007 total now seems likely to surpass the record 9 million acres burned last year.

One chilling media report, on CBS television, included an interview with a forest fire expert who cited the growing number of “mega-fires,” those of 100,000 acres or more, which used to be relatively rare, but are now commonplace. The current fire has already burned over 500,000 acres. This official estimated that more than half the forest land in the western United States could be burned out within a few decades because of the growing intensity and frequency of big fires.

The ecological Know-Nothings in the Bush administration, of course, suppressed any discussion of global warming at the federal level for years, and continue to reject any organized international effort to deal with or diminish the impact of the crisis.

What underlies all these factors, however, and is the fundamental cause of the social crisis, is the anarchic and unplanned character of the capitalist system. Housing tracts are built throughout southern California on the basis of the profit considerations of home builders, property developers and Wall Street speculators, not the needs of people for homes or the suitability of the development given the constraints of the natural environment.

The insurance companies, as always in an American disaster, operate in the most ruthless and socially destructive way. After Katrina, they frequently refused to pay for storm damage unless threatened with lawsuits or actually taken to court. There are already reports that the current fires will be used as a pretext for canceling policies or dramatically raising premiums.

The response of a rationally organized, i.e., socialist society to such a disaster would be a serious, well-financed, carefully planned reconstruction, that would take into account the common need for decent housing, as well as natural circumstances and the burden on social infrastructure such as water, sewage and electrical systems. Under the capitalist system, nothing more can be expected than a repetition of the profit-gouging and reckless plundering of nature and human labor that produced the disaster in the first place.



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