

California wildfire victims speak to the WSWS

“We’ve lost everything—we only have the clothes on our back”

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A week after the eruption of wildfires across seven Southern California counties led to the largest mass evacuation in California’s history, and as authorities announce progress in containing the blazes, people are returning to their homes to assess the damage and rebuild their lives. As of Sunday, over 2,000 homes had been consumed by fire and many more had sustained varying degrees of damage.

While most of the smaller fires have been contained and some have been largely extinguished, three of them, the Harris and Witch fires in San Diego County, the Arrowhead fire in San Bernardino County, and the Santiago Canyon fire in Orange County, are still not fully contained, making it impossible for many evacuees to return to their homes. The Santiago fire moved west into Silverado Canyon and prompted new evacuations.

So far, over 790 square miles have been burned. There is a danger that desert wind gusts, blowing east to west, will return this weekend, fanning the existing blazes and causing new fires. The similar, but stronger, “Santa Ana” winds accelerated the fires last week.

Despite assurances from Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and President George Bush that their needs would be met, thousands of victims confront the task of finding new shelter and perhaps new jobs.

A WSWS reporting team spoke with evacuees at the Red Cross temporary shelter at Steel Canyon High School in Spring Valley outside of San Diego. Maria Herbert teaches Spanish and is in the Master’s program at San Diego State University and her husband Randy is a small businessman. Maria said: “I’m here with my husband, our son, Randy Jr., 16, and our daughter, Paloma. Both our kids go to this high school. We had

two houses that burned.”

Randy said, “The main thing is we got out with our lives. We’re lucky for that. There was a 40- to 60-foot wall of flames moving quickly. There was nothing you could do. There was no air support because it was too windy, and the smoke was so bad. The firemen were just doing their job as best as they could with what they had. We heard that all the heavy-duty equipment to fight the fires is overseas.

“We’ve been through 10 fires in 10 years. Every year there’s a fire. But I have noticed a change in the climate; it’s been a lot drier and a lot hotter than before. So something was going to happen some time, somewhere. And this time you could feel it in the air. It was ripe.

“We’ve been here since last Sunday, one week. Yesterday we went back to our place. I’m glad we weren’t there to see it burn. Now, the whole area looks like the moon—desolate, burned. But we have to have a positive attitude. We’ll just rebuild. We loved it there because it’s so private and peaceful. There were rabbits, all types of sages, different species of birds, deer, bobcats, owls, mice, scorpions—lots of wildlife—now it’s all gone.”

Maria added, “It’s been an adventure. We’re trying to keep up a good sense of humor because everybody’s hurting. I feel sorry for some of the people here. Some people have five kids, no insurance, and no place to go. They were paying \$500 to \$600 a month for rent in a trailer park. But small apartments in town cost \$1,200 to \$1,600 a month. They can’t afford that.”

Unlike the Herberts who will be able to rebuild, Valentin Murillo spoke in Spanish to our reporters about the dire situation he and his family face.

Originally from Tecate, Mexico, he expressed what the vast majority of immigrants are now confronting. He was with five other members of his family, including his one-year-old nephew Jose Luis.

“We’ve lost everything. We lost our home, and we only have the clothes on our back. We lived in Dulzura in a trailer park with about 34 other families. Everybody had to leave. The majority is Mexican with a few Americans, and we’re all poor. Everyone dispersed, trying to find shelter and food. Some went to stay at hotels with the vouchers we received. But I don’t know what happened to everyone.

“Even if 25 percent of our home is good, there are no utilities, no phone, and no water. The whole area of Dulzura was wiped out.

“At the shelter here, there were 300 people like us trying to find shelter. It was just perfect for one week. We got enough food and drink; the living conditions were very good. We got vouchers to stay in a hotel for three to five days, but now I don’t know what we’re going to do. We have no place to go except possibly the streets or maybe a Christian church.

“I worked at Los Sausales Rancho rehabilitation center. My supervisor Rose said I was fired if I didn’t show up. But there was a fire. What was I supposed to do? I had to take care of my family. There was a lot of intimidation, and she only paid me for two days, not even a week’s pay. It’s just terrible.

“When I asked the FEMA officials what we should do, they said all we could do was wait. What? Three days, 15 days, a month? We can’t go back to Mexico because I’m in the process of becoming a citizen. It’s terrible, just terrible. The biggest problem for me is this baby. How will I feed him? I feel like all the doors are closed on us ... *puertas cerradas*.”

Aide Arredondo was watching her four children and a niece make treasure boxes with the volunteers at the Red Cross trailer. “We’re from Dulzura, where 35 trailers burned down. About 25 other homes survived near the dry riverbed. I have four children, ages 5, 8, 14, and 16. My niece is with me as well. We’re lucky. At least my husband can still keep his job at the Levittown manufacturing company.

“I know our home burned down because they brought photos of it. There’s nothing left. We lost our home, everything, everything. When I was leaving the house, I grabbed all my kids’ documents and papers, but I

forgot my own. I left my driver’s license and passport. *So I’m invisible right now*. You have to show ID to the sheriffs to get back into your neighborhood. I’m glad my husband has all his documents.

“I asked the FEMA people if we were going to get trailers. They said they didn’t know. My husband is registering with them. At least we’re getting food for the kids. We spent five days in a hotel. After that, we’ll have to see if we can rent an apartment.”

Her daughter Alejandra, a freshman at Steel Canyon High School, said, “We went back yesterday to look. It was all ashes. Everything was melted. I have to go back to school on Tuesday.”

Kate Webb, a member of the San Diego art therapist group, was helping children make crafts at the Red Cross trailer. She is also a marriage and family therapist. “We do art with the children and their families. It helps to relieve some of the stress. Because of this disaster, people’s sensory motor levels have been shattered. They have nightmares. Right now these kids are making treasure boxes. It’s a way to help provide a safe space in their lives.

“We helped in the 2003 fires also. This one was a huge fire, and many more people lost their homes this time. Organizationally, the city and many groups pulled together and it was much improved from the 2003 experience.

“In the drawings that the children are producing, I see a lot of homes, the fire, lots of pictures of families, families staying together, lots of pictures of pets. We also made masks. Some of the children made masks of horses because they were also caught in the fire. They also are writing lots of thank you notes to the workers and volunteers, drawing hearts, and showing their appreciation.”



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