

California inmate firefighter, 22, crushed to death protecting Malibu mansions

Eric London
1 March 2016

A 22-year-old prison inmate was killed while fighting a fire to protect a hillside of mansions in the ultra-wealthy resort town of Malibu, California, on Thursday. The young woman, Shawna Lynn Jones, sustained life-threatening injuries when a boulder rolled 100 feet down a hill and crushed her head. She was taken off life support Friday at UCLA's Ronald Reagan Medical Center.

A brushfire broke out Thursday in the early morning, threatening homes valued at \$2 million to \$8 million. Alongside more than 100 professional firefighters, 63 inmates were sent to fight the fire. Jones, who was serving time for drug possession, was scheduled to be released in six weeks.

Jones's death symbolizes the brutal state of social relations in the United States today. Paid a pittance, poorly trained, and kept under close watch by armed guards, young, nonviolent drug offenders' lives are endangered and sacrificed to protect the already-evacuated homes of the aristocracy.

Jones was one of 4,000 inmate firefighters used by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR). These prisoners are tasked with the extremely difficult job of cutting fire lines to combat California's increasingly dangerous wildfires. Inmate firefighters are paid little as \$1.45 per day and are given inadequate training to handle California's massive brushfires, whose flames can reach over 100 feet in height. Inmates are sometimes forced to work 24-hour shifts.

Thirty percent of California's firefighters are prisoners. The state has heavily relied on chain gang firefighters after years of budget cuts to state and federal fire prevention programs, with state officials boasting that the inmate firefighter program saves up to \$100 million each year.

The cuts come as global warming and severe drought have produced conditions ripe for fires. Throughout 2015, 4,382 wildfires took place in California. The US Forest Service said in an August 2015 report, "With a warming climate, fire seasons are now on average 78 days longer than in 1970," creating an elevated need for fire protection.

CDCR spokesman Scott Kernan said in a statement that Jones's "death is a tragic reminder of the danger that inmate firefighters face when they volunteer to confront fires to save homes and lives. On behalf of all of us in the department, I send my deepest condolences to her family"

First, Kernan is a long-time prison warden and his words of sympathy are hollow. Jones's death was an entirely preventable product of the super-exploitation of the US prison population.

Second, to say that prisoners "volunteer" for fire protection duty is to bend the meaning of the word. The fact that thousands of prisoners would rather fight flames and risk death than remain in California's overcrowded prisons speaks to the horrendous conditions of incarceration that exist in the US. In 2011, the US Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Plata* that overcrowding in California prisons violated the Eighth Amendment to the US Constitution, which protects against "cruel and unusual punishment."

In reality, conditions for California's inmate firefighters are themselves cruel and unusual. Demetrius Barr, an inmate firefighter, told the web site *Buzzfeed*: "Psh, this might be beyond slavery, whatever this is. They don't have a whip. That's the difference."

Paul Wright, editor of *Prison Legal News*, told *Vice*: "It's not just slave labor, it's very dangerous slave labor. ... If they weren't having the prisoners do the work for whatever pittance they pay them, they would

be paying non-prisoners 15-20 dollars an hour plus benefits.”

Forcing prisoners to fight fires is so cost-effective that the state wants to keep prisoners incarcerated in order to force participation in the program. Arguing against a proposed 2014 reform to facilitate release of nonviolent offenders, California’s Democratic attorney general Kamela Harris’s office argued in court that releasing nonviolent prisoners “would severely impact fire camp participation, a dangerous outcome while California is in the middle of a difficult fire season and severe drought.”

In 2013, more than 2 million people were incarcerated in state or federal prison, a total equaling nearly 1 percent of the adult population of the US. Exploitation of prison labor is not limited to firefighting. According to a 2007 article in the *Vanderbilt Law Review*, “Well over 600,000, and probably close to a million, inmates are working full-time in jails and prisons throughout the United States.”

Most inmates make between \$0.23 and \$1.25 an hour, with tens of thousands of prisoners producing material for the US military. By 2014, 37 states had legalized the exploitation of prison labor by private corporations, with corporations like IBM, Boeing, Motorola, Microsoft, AT&T, Dell, Honeywell, Intel, and Nordstrom’s making billions in profits from prison labor.

Shawna Lynn Jones, like thousands of prisoners in the US, never lived to see her release date. She spent her last day outside the prison, unconscious, and under observation by the police in a Los Angeles hospital.

Her firefighting crew accomplished their task. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported Friday after the fire was extinguished: “No structures were damaged.”



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact