

Alberta wildfire forces 88,000 to evacuate Fort McMurray

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The entire population of Fort McMurray, Alberta, was ordered to evacuate Tuesday afternoon after a wildfire that had been burning nearby since Sunday quickly spread and engulfed residential communities. The province declared a state of emergency late yesterday afternoon as authorities struggled to cope with the fire and tens of thousands of evacuees.

The city, which is the principal service center for Alberta's oil tar sands, has a population of some 85,000. Reports Wednesday indicated that an estimated 70,000 people had left for the south following the evacuation order, while 10,000 went north. 35,000 were expected to arrive in Edmonton, 430 kilometres (267 miles) to the south.

Scenes of chaos prevailed during the evacuation. Motorists fleeing both north and south were stranded for hours on blocked highways. Large numbers of people were seen at the roadside waiting to be rescued after running out of gas. All of the nearby accommodation facilities for tar sands workers had been filled with evacuees, as well as several newly-established emergency camps.

The evacuation was announced with little warning and at short notice, even though the fire had been burning in close proximity to the city for two days. The wind rapidly picked up speed early Tuesday afternoon, propelling the flames into residential areas previously thought safe. One local resident told the WSWs the scenes were "apocalyptic."

Alberta Minister of Municipal Affairs Danielle Larivee announced the state of emergency at a press conference late yesterday. Provincial authorities requested aid from the federal government, and Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan announced that the military will be deployed to the area.

Currently, only 200 firefighters, 12 helicopters and 17

air tankers are combating the inferno, which the local fire chief described as "nasty" and "ugly." The military has confirmed it will also send four CH-146 helicopters to the region. Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne said her province will send 100 firefighters and 19 support staff.

The fire remained out of control throughout yesterday. At lunchtime, officials confirmed it had surpassed 10,000 hectares and that all attempts to contain it had failed. Later in the day, it threatened to engulf Fort McMurray's airport. Officials acknowledged that the priority was making sure everyone was safe, and defending critical infrastructure, effectively accepting that further damage to residential properties is inevitable. The emergency services centre in the city was forced to evacuate to the community of Anzac, south of Fort McMurray, as the fire spread.

Reports suggest that at least 1,600 residential homes have already been destroyed in the blaze, meaning anywhere between 6,000 and 8,000 people are left homeless. Conditions for fighting the fire got even worse yesterday as winds picked up in the evening, so more damage will likely become apparent this morning. Already the damage far surpasses that of the worst wildfire catastrophe in recent times: the Slave Lake fire of May 2011, which razed a third of that northern Alberta town to the ground.

In some Fort McMurray neighbourhoods, like Beacon Hill, 80 percent of properties are reported destroyed. The fire even reached the downtown core, engulfing houses there.

Evacuees were largely left to rely on the generosity of members of the local community and the Red Cross, which intervened to provide emergency services.

Scott Long of the Alberta Emergency Management Agency admitted there was a real risk that the majority of Fort McMurray, which has seen its population more

than double over the past quarter-century, would be destroyed. “Obviously we’re working towards preventing that,” said Long. “But it is a possibility that we may lose a large portion of the town, yes.”

A number of tar sands companies have cut or entirely shut down production at plants located near Fort McMurray. Shell has shut down its Albion Sands site, while Suncor Energy has cut staffing levels.

The Fort McMurray blaze is only the largest fire in a growing number burning across western Canada. Dry weather conditions over the winter and an unusually warm spring, linked to the strong El Nino weather effect, forced Alberta to declare the start of its fire season on March 1, a month earlier than usual. Eleven forest fires are currently burning in the province.

Yesterday, 300 residents of Lac Ste. Anne County, including from the Alexis First Nation, were evacuated as a wildfire threatened their homes.

In neighbouring British Columbia, authorities had to turn down a request for help from Alberta because their own resources are seriously stretched by numerous fires raging in the Peace River region in the province’s northeast. Since April 1, almost 200 fires have burned across 230 square kilometres of BC.

Two weeks ago, the Peace River Regional District declared a state of emergency, resulting in evacuation orders for the Baldonnel community, the Blueberry First Nation and parts of Fort St. John. At the time, 48 fires were burning in the area.

Predictions are that the fire season this year will be much worse than previous years, even the record year of 2015 when over 10,000 people were evacuated from communities in northern Saskatchewan and Alberta. Mike Flannigan of the University of Alberta said that the number of fires which have broken out in 2016 is double the number at the same time this year.

Under these conditions, Alberta’s provincial New Democratic Party (NDP) government took the outrageous decision last month to slash this year’s wildfire management budget by \$15 million. This comes on top of moves by the previous Progressive Conservative government in March 2015 to cut funding for the Firesmart program, which clears debris and trees in proximity to residential areas to prevent the spread of fires.

The NDP’s cuts included reducing contracts for air tankers capable of spreading fire retardant and water

from 123 days to just 93 days per year. This move means that as of August 16, Alberta’s contracts with the private firms responsible for operating the tankers will expire. But the fire season runs until October.

While the NDP government insists it will hire the tankers as and when required, this plan was called into question by the head of Air Spray, one of the private providers. “If we get a longer-term contract somewhere else from Aug. 16, then we’re going to go,” said Paul Lane.

The woeful lack of preparedness at all levels of government for catastrophes like the one confronting Fort McMurray is even less forgivable given the widespread evidence of increased risk of wildfires due to climate change. Last year, Canada had to call on assistance from fire crews as far away as Australia to cover firefighting needs.

The damage wrought by the fire is occurring in a community that has already been hit hard by the economic crisis and the collapse in oil prices. Unemployment in the Fort McMurray and Wood Buffalo region increased 40 percent between January 2015 and January 2016, a figure which is likely an underestimation since many workers in the energy sector travel to the region temporarily for employment. Last month, the unemployment rate reached close to 10 percent.

A teacher from a Fort McMurray school spoke to the WSWs about the evacuation. He was given 15 minutes to pack personal belongings and leave the city, along with his girlfriend, her parents, and two dogs. He added that fire services had kept him and his pupils confined to their school for a large part of the day prior to the evacuation announcement.

After leaving the city, he came to a stretch of highway that had been jumped by the fire. Police officers permitted ten vehicles at a time to make a run for it and drive at high speed across the smoking stretch of roadway. As his truck passed through, a gas pipe under the road exploded next to his vehicle.



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