

# Fort McMurray teacher describes chaotic evacuation

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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a teacher and her partner who were among the approximately 80,000 people evacuated from Fort McMurray, Alberta on Tuesday. Both had lived in the city for around two years.

She explained how the order to leave came at very short notice. “We were at school and it was a normal day. I had heard that fires were passing by but we were told we were not in imminent threat because we were on the north side of the river. Then around 1 or 1:30 PM, our principal declared a ‘sheltered place’ in our school, meaning we had to stay in our classroom.”

“We heard other people were getting evacuated from different parts of the city. I was trying to calm the kids down and say we were fine. As soon as the bell rang we heard our community was being evacuated. We went home and grabbed our dog. There were things we were going to take and we had loads of room. But,” she added, “I didn’t think we’d be gone long, so we just took a change of clothes.”

Chaotic scenes were reported during the evacuation, with the fire burning on both sides of Highway 63, the only road out of the city to the south. The first two casualties resulting from the fire were reported late Wednesday. Two vehicles collided on Highway 881 while trying to leave the affected area, killing the driver and passenger in an SUV.

“There was a two-hour line-up at every gas station in the city,” the teacher told the WSW. “It was insane. We didn’t have time to get gas, there was so much gridlock that people were in traffic for ten hours.”

They were forced to leave Fort McMurray with the fuel they had and managed, unlike many others, to make it to their initial destination before running out of gas. “We ended up making it to Wandering River, with some gas left. It took us eight hours for a two-hour

drive. It was gridlock the whole way.”

At least 25,000 evacuees have been stranded north of the city, mainly in work camps operated by the oil corporations. Late Thursday, the Alberta government said 4,000 of these had been flown out on planes to Edmonton and Calgary.

“We took a chance to go south,” she continued. “It was so hard to see, but we managed to get out of town. My parents had a camper in Wandering River, so we wanted to get there. Luckily, they had only set it up last weekend.”

She added that they remain unsure about the fate of their home. “As far as we know, there are only two houses in our neighbourhood lost. That’s a good sign compared to other neighbourhoods like Abasand and Beacon Hill that suffered severe damage. At the moment we don’t know, we have no idea of the damage.”

The couple was travelling to Edmonton, 430 kilometres south of Fort McMurray, when they spoke to the WSW. “My boyfriend’s aunt lives there,” she said. “It’s a bit more comfortable and we can do laundry.”

Strong sympathy for the plight of those forced to flee has been expressed by nearby communities and people across the country. Millions of dollars have already been donated to relief organizations. “We’ve been so thankful for all the offers of help we’ve had,” she said. “People near and far are doing everything to help out. Some are going back into the city to rescue their pets. The first responders were all friendly in a tough situation.”

“As we were driving along Highway 63 south to Wandering River, there were people on the side of the road with gas and water. People were giving away free meals as well,” she added.

Thousands of residents have lost their homes and possessions. An estimate released Thursday suggested insurable losses could reach \$9 billion, making the fire the most expensive disaster in Canadian history. “We’re really lucky. I have colleagues and friends who know their houses are gone,” she said. “My cousin lives in Abasand; he knows his house, truck and all his things are lost. It’s really hard.”



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