

Alberta wildfire continues to spread, forcing further evacuations

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The huge wildfire that has forced the evacuation of Fort McMurray—the northern Alberta city that is the hub of Canada’s tar-sands oil industry—continued to rage uncontrollably yesterday.

Already late Wednesday, authorities were forced to widen the evacuation zone to include three communities south of Fort McMurray: Anzac, Fort McMurray First Nation, and Gregoire Lake Estates. Among those uprooted by the latest evacuation order were approximately one thousand Fort McMurray evacuees who were being temporarily housed at a camp in Anzac.

Close to 90,000 people have now been evacuated from the Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo region since Tuesday.

Fueled by strong winds, the fire expanded more than eight-fold Wednesday night to engulf 85,000 hectares. Officials now say that only rain can stop it.

At a press conference yesterday, Alberta Premier Rachel Notley said there was no fresh information about the extent of the damage in the city because firefighters did not have enough time to assess it and could not access some areas.

Earlier reports had said that 1,600 buildings had been partially or completely destroyed, with a conservative estimate of at least 5,000 rendered homeless.

Later, Notley warned the fire could “absolutely” grow larger in the coming days, adding that it would be more than “a matter of days” before residents can return home.

A total of 41 fires were reported burning across the province yesterday: Ten of these were out of control, and twelve fires were newly broken out. The weather forecast for the coming days remains dry, with fire activity predicted to be high or extreme.

Visible from space, the Fort McMurray wildfire has begun, due to its size, to create its own weather. This includes winds and lightning from smoke clouds, which could provoke new blazes.

Fort McMurray was effectively cut off from the rest of Alberta late Wednesday. The fire burned on both sides of Highway 63, the only road leading south. Significant damage occurred around the airport Wednesday evening, but

authorities claim that it is not currently under threat.

An estimated 25,000 evacuees are stranded to the north of the city and are being housed in work camps owned by the oil companies.

Reports continued to emerge describing the harrowing conditions during Tuesday’s evacuation of Fort McMurray, which was ordered with little forewarning and with, for many, a deadline of just one hour. One woman told CBC the conditions were like a “war” as flames rained down on cars and propane tanks exploded.

Fort McMurray bears all the hallmarks of a capitalist resource-extraction boom-town, with huge fortunes being made by the oil barons amidst mounting social problems and distress.

With Fort McMurray’s population mushrooming from 6,000 in 1970 to 35,000 in 1990 and more than doubling over the past 25 years, the demand for infrastructure, from housing to decent schools and health care facilities, has continuously outpaced supply.

The lack of proper infrastructure has been starkly revealed by the evacuation itself, with only one highway leading out of a city of close to 100,000 people.

While it is not possible at this point to determine whether poor quality materials and shoddy building practices were factors in the extensive damage in Fort McMurray, these have been persistent complaints in recent years.

Yet Fort McMurray and the surrounding region have produced tens of billions in profits for Canadian capitalism’s major oil corporations. In the 12-month period ending March 2015, even as oil prices had begun their steep decline, major oil corporations raked in huge profits, including \$1.3 billion for Suncor, \$600 million for Enbridge, \$3.6 billion for Canadian Natural Resources, \$1.1 billion for Husky Energy and \$1.7 billion for TransCanada Corp.

These profits were achieved through ruthless exploitation of a workforce drawn from across the country and even around the world, and with disregard to the environment and to the health of local populations, including First Nations’ communities.

Many workers who laboured hard during the oil boom, some travelling halfway across the continent to work 12-hour shifts for three weeks before a seven-day break, have been tossed aside over the past year-and-a-half.

Big Oil and numerous smaller oil service companies have slashed thousands of jobs in Fort McMurray and the surrounding tar sands region, while forcing many of those who remain in their employ to take pay cuts.

Since 2014, Fort McMurray's population has shrunk from over 100,000 to somewhere in the range of 85,000 to 90,000. In early April, local media reported the lengthening of food bank hours in Fort McMurray to cope with increased demand. Unemployment in the Wood Buffalo region, which includes the city, was pushing 10 percent last month.

A Conference Board of Canada report released last October predicts that in spite of the low oil prices, the companies will return to profitability in 2016 because of their cost-cutting measures.

In comparison with the vast wealth extracted from the local area by Big Oil, the resources made available by the authorities to tackle the catastrophe provoked by the wildfires are miniscule. Fleeing residents have been largely left to rely on the generosity of residents in nearby communities, who have rushed to their aid with large donations of food, clothing, gas and accommodation. The other main source of relief has been charities like the Red Cross.

In the House of Commons yesterday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau pledged Ottawa would match donations to the Red Cross to support relief efforts. The federal government has also sent some military resources to the region, including planes and helicopters.

At a press conference Wednesday, Trudeau sought to downplay the link between the fire and climate change. He attacked Green Party leader Elizabeth May for daring to suggest such a connection, declaring, "There have always been fires. There have always been floods. Pointing at any one incident and saying 'This is because of that,' is neither helpful nor entirely accurate."

Trudeau's refusal to admit the link to climate change is politically calculated. His government is anxious to strengthen its partnership with Big Oil by pushing through the building of oil pipelines to the country's east and west coasts. This is seen as critical not just to boosting the profits of big business, but also in strengthening Canadian imperialism's position on the world stage by establishing the country, in the words of former Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper, as an "energy superpower."

The reality is that a fire on the scale of that which has struck Fort McMurray has long been predicted by scientists. In the wake of the 2011 fire that destroyed a third of the

northern Alberta town of Slave Lake, a report produced by a panel of experts commissioned by the Alberta government pointed to the growing likelihood of wildfires and explicitly identified climate change as a major cause.

Noting the growing number of people living and working in forested areas of the province, and the rising age of the forest due to a reduction in areas being burnt as part of the natural cycle, the report stated, "Experts say that climate change is increasing the wildfire threat, some aspects of which are already measurable with longer fire seasons and more extreme weather. As a result, the risk of wildfires, and the threat they pose to lives, homes, communities, and industry is increasing."

In 2014, the UN's International Panel on Climate Change noted in a report with "high confidence" that North America would confront heightened "wildfire-induced loss of ecosystem integrity, property loss, human morbidity, and mortality as a result of increased drying trend and temperature trend."

2015 was a record year for wildfires in western Canada, with over 10,000 evacuated from communities in northern Alberta and Saskatchewan. Experts agree that the current wave of fires are the combined product of climate change and the impact of a strong El Niño effect.

In this context, the lack of preparedness at all levels of government for such entirely foreseeable disasters as the Fort McMurray fire is scandalous. The 2012 report proposed expanding fire weather advisories to include fire behaviour, creating quick response units with specialists, and expanding Alberta's Firesmart program, which clears debris from residential areas.

In 2015, Alberta's Progressive Conservative government made cuts to the Firesmart program. The recently-adopted budget of the current New Democratic Party provincial government contained a further \$15 million in cuts to the wildfire budget.



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