

Devastation from Alberta wildfire continues to spread

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The wildfire in the Fort McMurray-Wood-Buffalo region of northern Alberta, the center of Canada's tar-sands oil production, continues to spread. Officials acknowledge that the blaze, which now encompasses over 1,600 square kilometres (615 miles), could go on for months unless stopped by rain.

Around 90,000 people, including the entire population of Fort McMurray, and the residents of the nearby communities of Anzac, Fort McKay First Nation, and Fort McMurray First Nation have been forced from their homes. A provincial state of emergency declared May 4 remains in force as fires continue to burn out of control in a number of places, including Slave Lake, High Level, and Clearwater County.

During Friday and Saturday, 25,000 people stranded north of Fort McMurray in oil-worker camps were evacuated to Edmonton and Calgary in convoys directed by the RCMP. Police also relocated small numbers of people still in the city who were either unable or unwilling to leave. No Fort McMurray evacuees were left north of the city by yesterday morning.

The only two fatalities reported thus far occurred in a traffic accident Wednesday, when an SUV and a trailer-truck collided on Highway 881 during the evacuation, which was ordered on short-notice and with almost no prior warning.

Alberta Premier Rachel Notley has said that it will be some time—weeks, not days—before residents can return to their homes. Although a turn in the weather yesterday brought rain, the fire continued to spread and reportedly was coming close to the Saskatchewan border, 90 kilometres to the east of Fort McMurray.

Fire conditions have stabilized in Fort McMurray itself, and Notley is set to visit today to begin assessing the damage. First responders began going door-to-door to confirm the state of properties yesterday. Although officials have yet to make a tally of damaged buildings, it

is clear that large portions of the city have been destroyed. Officials noted that even buildings that have survived largely intact may have suffered extensive water-damage in the effort to save them. *Maclean's* magazine, which was given special access to the city Friday, described the neighbourhoods of Beacon Hill and Abasand as lying in “ruins,” while Waterways, Fort McMurray's oldest, was also severely damaged.

The catastrophe caused by the Fort McMurray fire is a product of the capitalist system's rapacious drive for profit. Big Oil has extracted vast riches from the Fort McMurray area over the past four decades, at considerable cost to the environment. Yet hardly anything was done to guard against an entirely foreseeable disaster. As Fort McMurray's population ballooned to over 100,000 before the 2014 oil price collapse, basic infrastructure and services remained wanting.

Although the full extent of the damage to the city remains unclear, there is a stark contrast between the city's scorched residential streets and the fate of the oil companies' tar-sands infrastructure.

At least 1,600 structures in Fort McMurray have been destroyed. The fire also burnt close to facilities operated by Suncor and other oil producers, but because they were surrounded by wide fire breaks and defended by specially-trained company firefighters, none has suffered significant damage. This fact calls into question the claims of senior fire management officials that no fire-break, regardless of its width, could have prevented the fire from laying waste large swathes of Fort McMurray.

Speaking on CTV's Question Period yesterday, federal Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale confirmed that no damage had been suffered by oil facilities, adding, “They will be in a position to get back and running relatively quickly after the danger is past.”

As with other environmental disasters, like Hurricane Katrina and the 2010 BP Gulf of Mexico oil spill, the

devastation wrought by the wildfire has been exacerbated by the capitalist system's subordination of the safety of the local population and environment to the accumulation of vast wealth. The extraction of tar sands oil by the major oil corporations has produced an environmental disaster in the region, including damaging fresh water supplies, creating pools of toxic waste, and destroying large areas of forest.

Scientists have repeatedly warned about the threat posed by wildfires due to a growing presence of humans in forested areas of the province (principally for oil extraction), the hotter and dryer weather produced by climate change, and the lack of preparedness. Yet few measures were taken to guard against the danger.

Dr. Mike Flannigan, a well-respected expert on wildfires from the University of Alberta, told CBC that the area burnt by wildfires in the country has doubled since 1970. He went on to emphasize the danger of large cities being developed in the boreal forest, and referred to the opinion of a colleague that a fire break of 2 kilometres should be created around cities by removing trees and brush.

He went on to outline the consequences of failing to establish fire breaks around urban areas. "Wildland firefighters are trained to fight wildfire, and municipal firefighters are trained to fight structural fires. Now, you have both types, creating a very dangerous hybrid fire and it's entering an area with propane tanks, gas stations and other potentially explosive things."

The frequency of fires in Canada has risen sharply over recent years. Last year, by early September, 6,700 fires had burnt around 4 million hectares. Currently, more than 80 fires are burning in Alberta and British Columbia, and twice as many fires have been reported this fire season as compared to the same point last year.

Successive Alberta provincial governments have cut resources for the management of wildfires and for precautionary measures to prevent their spread. One consequence of this is that from August 16 this year, no air-tanker coverage for the province of Alberta is currently in place, even though the fire season runs until October.

John Innes, Dean of Forestry at the University of British Columbia, gave voice to the frustration in the scientific community when he told *Macleod's*, "Our research and modelling we have done over the past ten years has been pointing to this. I hate to say I told you so, but that's what the scientific community has been saying for some time and trying to get politicians and others to

pay attention to."

The financial elite's utter disregard for the residents of the affected region is exemplified by commentary in the corporate media that Fort McMurray should perhaps be rebuilt on a smaller scale, now that oil prices have collapsed.

Thousands of evacuees remain unsure if their homes are still standing or if they will have jobs to return to. As one woman told CBC, referring to her partner and herself, "We were six months without work. We just got back on our feet, so now it is a new start."

Even prior to the wildfire, unemployment in Alberta was rising sharply and was higher than the Canadian average for the first time since the 1980s. Statistics Canada reported on Friday that total employment in Alberta dropped by 20,800 in April.

Many of the residents evacuated from Fort McMurray are among the most vulnerable sections of the population. Workers from outside Canada were brought in to fill low-wage jobs in Fort McMurray in catering, retail and childcare. Due to Canada's reactionary "temporary foreign worker" laws, a significant number of these immigrants now face the prospect of being expelled from the country. The "temporary foreign worker" regulations stipulate that a worker is bound to his or her employer, meaning that if companies have been put out of business or cannot pay their "foreign workers," they lose their entitlement to stay in the country.

Some of the Syrian refugees taken in by Canada also lived in the city. Abdul Almouazan and eight other family members were forced to flee Fort McMurray and are now being housed at the Al-Rashid Mosque in Edmonton along with 140 other evacuees, including refugees from Somalia.



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