

Canadian capitalism and the Fort McMurray wildfire

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10 May 2016

Millions of people across Canada and around the world have been moved by the images of destruction and harrowing tales of escape that have emerged from Fort McMurray, Alberta, over the past week. On short notice and with next to no forewarning, some 90,000 residents were evacuated May 3, as a huge wildfire began to consume large parts of the city that is the hub for Canada's massive oil tar-sands industry.

As with other environmental disasters like Hurricane Katrina and the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill, the extensive damage wrought by the wildfire is the direct product of the capitalist system's rapacious pursuit of profit. The lives of tens of thousands of workers and their families have been turned upside down by a calamity that at the very least could have been mitigated, if not entirely prevented.

Alberta Premier Rachel Notley toured the devastated city yesterday with a small group of reporters. They found that some 2,400 structures, including entire residential neighbourhoods, had burnt to the ground and that basic services essential for life, including the provision of fresh water and electricity, are not functioning. Notley has warned it will be weeks before most of the residents can return.

Experts had been warning for many years of the potential for a disaster like that now playing out in Fort McMurray.

Scientists have demonstrated that increased temperatures resulting from climate change and more human activity in the boreal forest—principally due to the expansion of the oil, mining and logging industries—have increased the likelihood of serious wildfires. Dr. Mike Flannigan, a wildfire expert at the University of Alberta, has stated that the area burnt by wildfires in Canada has doubled since 1970, and predicted more than two decades ago that fire seasons would become longer.

Expanded human activity has also resulted in the circumventing of the normal cycle of lightning-induced fires, an essential component of forest regeneration, leaving a large stock of older more combustible forests.

Severe fires hit Kelowna, British Columbia, in 2003 and Slave Lake, Alberta, in 2011, destroying numerous structures and leading to calls, including from a 2012 Alberta government-appointed wildfire review committee, for increased investment in fire prevention and forest management. Experts repeatedly warned that cities in or close to the boreal forest needed to

develop fire mitigation measures, including the establishment of fire breaks so as to deprive advancing blazes of fuel before they reach residential areas.

Yet Canada's political establishment wilfully ignored such warnings. The federal minister of Natural Resources, Jim Carr, was warned in the briefing notes his department gave him on his appointment last November that governments across the country had not done enough to prepare for the spike in wildfires. In Alberta, firefighting budgets were repeatedly cut, including by the current New Democratic Party government just three weeks prior to the Fort McMurray blaze.

Harper and Trudeau—a common agenda

The previous federal Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper facilitated the massive and rapid expansion of tar sands oil production, with flagrant disregard for the impact on First Nations' communities and the environment. Its stated goal was not only to swell the coffers of Canadian big business, but to use the country's oil, natural gas, uranium and hydroelectric resources wealth to make Canada an "energy superpower," with increased leverage on the global stage.

However, the Conservatives proved incapable of pushing through the infrastructure projects to realize this strategy, especially the pipelines to transport increased Alberta oil production to Canada's east and west coasts and the Gulf of Mexico. In part, this was due to the widespread public hostility triggered by the Harper Conservatives' extensive ties to Big Oil and their unapologetic right-wing program, including the effective denial of climate change.

The Liberals secured the support of the dominant sections of the ruling elite in last year's federal election, by arguing that they could better pursue austerity at home and the aggressive assertion of it interests abroad, including through increased military interventions, by repackaging them in "progressive" rhetoric.

This also holds true for the exploitation of the tar sands.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has made clear his determination to get new pipelines built. However, he has taken a somewhat different tack from Harper: embracing climate change rhetoric; pursuing a “North American climate and energy partnership” with US imperialism aimed at exploiting the geostrategic significance of North American “energy independence” and the business opportunities offered by clean energy, and urging the domestic oil industry to clean up its act so as to make it easier to market its product globally.

Trudeau’s response to the Fort McMurray wildfire underscores that the Liberals are as wedded to Big Oil and the predatory interests and ambitions of Canadian capitalism as the Conservatives.

Trudeau was quick to dismiss any “political” explanation for the Alberta wildfire, whether the failure to heed repeated warnings and invest in social infrastructure or the broader crisis caused by climate change. “There have always been fires,” declared Canada’s prime minister. “There have always been floods. Pointing at any one incident and saying ‘This is because of that,’ is neither helpful nor entirely accurate.”

Such obfuscation is politically motivated and deliberately aimed at concealing the reality that while tens of thousands of working people have seen their lives devastated overnight, the oil industry in the environs of Fort McMurray remains almost entirely intact. This is because unlike the people, they were considered valuable enough to be surrounded by wide firebreaks and guarded by specially trained fire crews.

Fort McMurray and capitalism’s socially destructive character

Whilst the oil companies, to use the words of Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale, “will be in a position to get back and running relatively quickly after the danger is past,” many of Fort McMurray’s residents will not have jobs or homes to go back to. Some, thanks to the provisions of Canada’s reactionary immigration laws, could even be thrown out of the country.

The fire catastrophe struck a population already ravaged by the consequences of the global capitalist crisis.

Fort McMurray is a quintessential capitalist resource-extraction boomtown with all that entails. Its population nearly trebled in size from 35,000 in 1990 to over 100,000 at the peak of the commodity boom in 2014. Although there was a chronic lack of housing, a dearth of schools and health care facilities, and they had to pay high prices and often work long hours, workers were drawn to Fort McMurray from across Canada and around the world.

Over the past 20 months, with the oil price plunge, this has played out in reverse. Thousands have left the area after their

jobs were slashed. Large numbers of others have had to endure wage cuts, been forced to survive on jobless benefits, or to turn to food banks. A Reuters article published yesterday reported that for some of the city’s homeless, who are now being housed and fed in evacuation camps, conditions of life are actually better than before the fire.

The ruling class’s contempt towards the population, whom they see as a disposable resource to be made available as and when the profit interests of big business dictate, is exemplified by the press commentary arguing that the wildfire provides an opportunity to rebuild Fort McMurray on a smaller scale—one commensurate with the oil industry’s post price-drop dynamics.

The Fort McMurray wildfire is not a natural, but a man-made disaster for which the capitalist profit system bears responsibility. The resources and technology exist to combat the risks posed by forest fires to human civilization, and there have been countless proposals drawn up by scientific studies and conferences outlining what can and should be done.

But all such initiatives immediately run up against capitalism’s irrepressible lust for the accumulation of fabulous sums of wealth. Everything, including the safety of working people, their families and necessities of life, is subordinated to the private interests of a super-rich oligarchy.

Only through the establishment of a socialist society, where production is planned and democratically controlled by the workers themselves, can the vast natural resources of the earth be utilized in a sustainable manner and the necessary measures taken to combat climate change and guard against wildfires and other recurring threats to human life. Socialism, a system which places the needs of humanity above the private accumulation of wealth, can free the abundant technological and creative abilities currently suppressed by ever-declining budgets and corporate interests to establish safe and healthy conditions of life for all.



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