

Thousands of oil workers evacuated as Alberta wildfire spreads

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Up to 8,000 oil workers were evacuated from camps north of Fort McMurray, Alberta, Monday after the wildfire that destroyed large parts of the city earlier this month expanded rapidly.

The fire has grown in size significantly this week, rising to 505,000 hectares on Thursday and crossing the Saskatchewan boundary. The Blacksand Executive Lodge, capable of housing 655 workers, was destroyed by fire Tuesday.

Many of the workers were being evacuated for a second time in less than two weeks, having only arrived back in the area days before as the oil companies sought to quickly restart production following the evacuation of 90,000 Fort McMurray residents.

Alberta Premier Rachel Notley unveiled a “conditional timeline” for residents to return to the city Wednesday, saying that this process would begin June 1. The first step will see residents returning on a voluntary basis, before all residents join them June 15. She said that this was dependent upon the fire no longer threatening the city, the hospital being open and able to provide basic health services, 911 service being available and fire and police services operational, all roads being open to traffic and utilities restored, and supplies of potable water and food being provided.

Notley added that schools would not reopen until September. A total of 2,432 buildings were destroyed in the city, and over 500 were severely damaged. A further 10 homes were damaged in an explosion Monday night.

No serious damage has been reported to the region’s tar sands facilities, which are surrounded by large firebreaks and equipped with teams of industrial firefighters.

The catastrophe provoked by the wildfire is a product of the capitalist system’s ruthless pursuit of profit at all costs. Multibillion-dollar windfalls have been obtained by the major oil corporations through the vast expansion of the tar sands operations over recent decades.

Fort McMurray, which exploded from a small town with a population of just 35,000 in 1990 to over 100,000 at the peak of the oil boom in 2014, exemplifies the way in which basic social services and infrastructure were sacrificed to cut costs. While every conceivable measure has been taken to protect the tar sands production facilities, the ruling elite saw the workers as disposable assets. The lack of preparedness for wildfires was exacerbated by the impact of climate change and a strong El Niño effect.

Even as workers were rushed back into the region to restart production, reports indicated how unsafe the Fort McMurray area remains. On Monday morning, the provincial government reported air contamination rates were off the charts, reaching a reading of 38 on a scale that normally runs 1 to 10. It rose even higher, to 51, on Wednesday morning. This prompted an order for all firefighters and other emergency workers in Fort McMurray to wear gas masks, while Alberta Health Services ordered other workers planning to return to the area to help with recovery work not to do so. There are several hundred workers in the city attempting to prepare the hospital for reopening at the end of the month, and others reconnecting electricity and gas supplies.

Scientists are also warning that local water supplies will be contaminated with hazardous materials, and that rain will make the problem worse by washing ash and other debris into the Athabasca River, from where Fort McMurray obtains its water supply.

Many of the oil workers compelled to be frantically evacuated as the fire closed in this week explained they had no option but to return to work, even if conditions were unsafe. Lucy Fitzgerald, a Suncor employee, who like many moved from Canada’s east coast to work in the tar sands, told CBC, “It’s a day-by-day thing right now, and that’s all I can do. It’s either that or go home, and stay home, and I can’t afford to do that right now.”

Others spoke out anonymously about their frustration at the oil corporation's pursuit of profit, which had seen workers sent into an active emergency zone. "Yeah, without a doubt. They lose so much money a day that that's all they see," a contractor told the *Globe and Mail*.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau rejected from the outset any attempt to provide a "political" explanation for the disaster, sharply criticizing the suggestion by Green Party leader Elizabeth May that climate change may have played a role.

This has won him plaudits in ruling circles, who see the crisis as an ideal opportunity to build public support for pipelines to enable the large corporations to transport oil from Alberta's tar sands to tidal water. CBC enthused over the "positive media buzz" surrounding Trudeau's May 13 visit to Fort McMurray and Edmonton, and pollster Bruce Cameron commented that it was refreshing to see discussion about the oil sands that did not concentrate on environmental problems or climate change, but the "human face." Far from being concerned with the lives of ordinary residents, he laid out what for him was significant about this, stating, "It could have longer term implications in terms of making a human face for the oil sands."

More information continues to come to light about the utter lack of preparedness at all levels of government, despite repeated warnings about the wildfire risk.

Over 70 percent of the Alberta government's FireSmart budget, which is supposed to be dispersed to local communities to support fire mitigation measures, has remained unspent since 2014. Of the total funding of \$23.6 million received by the Forest Resource Improvement Association of Alberta between 2014 and 2016, only \$6.9 million had been allocated. This translates into 71 cents of every dollar remaining unspent.

Even more troubling was the rejection rate for communities who applied for funding. Of the 223 applications sent in by 80 communities from across the province in the past three years, only 113 were approved. Most of those declined because projects were deemed "ineligible." However, the provincial government continues to insist that local communities must take the lead in wildfire preparedness.

This comes on top of the cuts to provincial wildfire budgets, including the New Democratic Party (NDP) government's slashing of the contracts for air tankers used to fight fires just three weeks prior to the Fort McMurray evacuation. The move means that as of August 16, Alberta will have no air tanker coverage in place, even

though the fire season runs well into October.

At the federal level, persistent warnings have also been ignored. Jim Carr, the Liberals' natural resources minister, received an explicit warning about the growing wildfire risk in briefing notes last year when he entered office. A 2005 wildfire strategy agreed by the federal and provincial governments is effectively stalled due to lack of funds.

Compared with the vast wealth extracted from the tar sands, the resources made available by the authorities to support the evacuees have been paltry. The Alberta government has paid \$1,250 to every adult and \$500 to each dependent, while the Red Cross, thanks to over \$65 million in donations from across the country, paid out \$600 per adult and \$300 per dependent.

The Edmonton Emergency Relief Services Society, which is running the main evacuation camp at Northlands, has stated there is a "desperate" need for donations to keep up with demand.

The critical task of distributing the basic necessities of life to thousands of families trying to get by with little financial resources has fallen to volunteers. The society issued a call Tuesday for more to come forward. More than 4,000 have assisted at a makeshift distribution centre set up at an Edmonton mall. "We would never be able to [do] it without the volunteers, they are our legwork and heart of what is going on," a coordinator told the *Edmonton Journal*. "We do have to stress enough that we still cannot continue to be able to maintain and help as many evacuees without their ongoing support."

The cramped conditions in the camps have contributed to the rapid spread of stomach sickness. On Monday, it was reported that 281 evacuees had contracted a gastrointestinal illness, an increase of 138 percent in six days. "It's very hard to keep it from spreading," said Joanna Oda, a medical officer with Alberta Health Services. "This is not unexpected. This is what happens when many people are gathered in smaller places."



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