

Los Angeles County wildfires prompt California governor to declare state of emergency

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On Sunday, California Governor Jerry Brown declared a state of emergency in Los Angeles County as wildfires raged in the Verdugo Mountains, causing the destruction of four homes and the temporary closure of a tract of the 210 Freeway. The decision allowed the mobilization of state resources to help fight the fire.

The 7,003-acre fire, which erupted last Friday, is the largest in the city's history by acreage size and it extends between the cities of Los Angeles, Burbank and Glendale, densely populated areas in Los Angeles County. Additionally, the city of Burbank is known as the "Media Capital of the World," with headquarters of all major media and entertainment corporations and studio facilities.

The proximity of the fire to crucial business interests, as well as concerns for the safety of affluent areas like the Cabrini Villas and the private housing off of Castleman Lane, prompted the deployment of what has been named the La Tuna Fire Unified Command, an aggregate of fire departments from Los Angeles, Los Angeles County, Burbank, Glendale, Cal Fire and Cal OES, among other agencies.

Evacuation orders were placed in effect in the impacted areas, with several hundred residents ordered to evacuate. As of Monday morning, only about 30 percent of the fire was contained despite the deployment of over 1,000 firefighters and nine aircraft.

Despite what may seem like a robust contingent of manpower, firefighters were in many instances required to work 36 hours straight in heat over 100 degrees, further exposing the insufficiency of the forces deployed. The hard-pressed firefighters received significant support from the area's residents, who provided them with water and food.

In addition to the damage immediately produced by the

fires, officials raised serious concerns in anticipation of consequent mudslides this coming winter.

A few dozen miles east, in Riverside County, a 3,300-acre area was also in flames over the weekend and was only 15 percent contained by Sunday.

Weather conditions have contributed to the speed of development of these fires. Record high temperatures and low humidity have compounded highly flammable conditions after a heavy winter rain season that ended five years of drought and yielded an above-normal growth in vegetation.

There have been 4,626 fires in California this year, a substantial increase from 3,525 as of September 1 last year, causing significant damage and displacing thousands. Some of them have been quite massive in size. At the time of this writing, the largest is the Eclipse Complex Fire in Northern California's Siskiyou County along the Oregon border, which burned 80,503 acres in the Klamath National Forest and was just 25 percent contained as of Sunday.

The Forest Service anticipates full containment of the Eclipse Complex Fire by October 10. Such estimates expose the consequences of budget cuts and the utter insufficiency of resources allocated for crucial public services. This in many cases translates into matters of life and death as well as environmental disasters.

The entire Pacific region is currently affected by wildfires. Thousands of acres and 2,700-year-old grand sequoia groves at Yosemite National Park have suffered losses. The state of Oregon is embattled in large fires as well. In Hood River County, about 140 hikers stranded in the mountains overnight were rescued after being trapped between two fires. In southwest Oregon, the so-called Chetco Bar "megafire" has affected more than 140,000 acres of land, threatening several towns, like Brookings

and Selma.

Further north in the Canadian province of British Columbia some 2.2 million acres have burned since July and some 40,000 people have been evacuated.

To any reasonable person, the idea that public safety can be subject to budget cuts makes no sense. In California alone, the last two years have seen about 5 percent cuts from CalFIRE's budget. In Los Angeles, last May a 2017-18 budget was passed unanimously that included an inadequate \$24 million increase to the Fire Department budget, despite overwhelming foreknowledge that the previous winter conditions increased the chances for massive fires.

Worse, in Riverside County, currently affected by significant wildfires, the county Board of Supervisors voted unanimously last April in favor of \$6 million in cuts to the fire department.

Budget cuts are only one facet of the irrational manner in which capitalism organizes social resources. Preparedness on the basis of scientific evidence is another aspect that is neglected in a capitalist economy and results in disastrous consequences.

Moreover, while the last few centuries have seen a massive development of human productive capacity and ability to master the natural environment, capitalism has been unable to rationally control the forces involved, thus having a detrimental effect on the environment, which in turn further increases the chances for disasters.

An example of this is the recent Hurricane Harvey, which flooded much of Houston, Texas and other cities along the Gulf Coast. The consequences of such a storm were foreseen, yet no resources were allocated for an anti-flood plan or an orderly evacuation of the fourth largest city in the United States.

Disasters under capitalism translate into misery and death for the working class and investment opportunities for the rich, bringing into full focus the need for a socialist reorganization of world society that can ensure safety and well-being to all.



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