

Evacuees speak about devastating California fires

Our reporters
13 October 2017

The fires in Northern California continued to spread Thursday with little sign of diminishing. By the afternoon the death toll reached 31, making it the deadliest outbreak of wildfires in the state's history. Nearly two dozen major fires have burned almost 200,000 acres since Sunday, causing rapid evacuations and widespread devastation.

Many of the largest fires continue to burn out of control with strong dry winds expected to continue to fan the flames today. The Atlas fire, which has burned over 40,000 acres near Napa, is only 3 percent contained. The Tubbs fire, which scoured Santa Rosa and threatens nearby Calistoga, is only 10 percent contained.

Most of the fires are currently burning in rural areas with a lower population but thousands of people are under mandatory evacuation orders.

The fires tore into the city of Santa Rosa, population 175,000, Sunday night and have forced the evacuation of Calistoga in the Napa Valley. At least 3,500 buildings have been destroyed across Sonoma, Mendocino, Napa, and Yuba counties. Roughly 400 people remain missing and the death toll is expected to rise well past the 29 people killed in Southern California's Griffith Park fire of 1933.

Air quality across the state has deteriorated with the Air Quality Index affecting the 7 million people of the entire San Francisco Bay Area officially declared "unhealthy." Many schools across the area closed.

The majority of deaths came from the initial burning of the northern part of Santa Rosa on Sunday night. Many people had to flee their homes after waking up in the middle of night to smoke before hearing of any evacuation orders.

The lack of modern emergency infrastructure became apparent in the early hours of the fire when emergency

officials decided not to send out a mass cell phone alert because they could only send it to the entire county and not just those affected. Old methods of notifying evacuees like radio, auto-dialers, and door-to-door canvassing left many residents completely unaware of the fast approaching fire.

Details of those killed in the fires are starting to emerge—many of the victims were elderly or disabled and living in trailer homes. Sara and Charles Rippey, 98 and 100, died just a few months after their 75th wedding anniversary in their Napa home. Christina Hanson, 27, was confined to a wheelchair and died when her house burned.

Kai Sheperd, 14, died as his family tried to flee the Redwood Valley Fire. His family of four initially tried to escape the fire in two cars down a dirt road but proceeded on foot after the fire cut them off. Kai's sister and parents suffered severe burns and remain hospitalized.

Nearly 8,000 firefighters have been trying to divert the fires from urban centers, and many are reaching the breaking point from constant work. "We've got guys who have been working 80 hours straight," Captain Sean Norman, deputy head of operations for the Sonoma Valley fires, told the *Los Angeles Times*. Roughly a third of California's firefighters are prisoners who work in these dangerous conditions for approximately \$1 a day.

Reporters with the *World Socialist Web Site* traveled to evacuation centers in Sonoma County Thursday to speak with some of those affected.

Ed and his daughter Jasmine were at the Finley Community Center in Santa Rosa, after having to flee the nearby city of Calistoga. The fire reached their house in the middle of the night and they had to leave at 1 a.m. on Monday, before any official evacuation

order was put in place. Ed worked as a mechanic but had to stop due to blood clots and Parkinson's disease. Jasmine is a student and works at McDonald's.

"We only took a few things with us, like our phones," Jasmine said. "We're not people who can afford electronics a lot of the time." They went back to find everything they had left destroyed. "I don't really know how we'll recover," Ed added.

"I've been here most of my life and I haven't seen the government do much to prevent fires," Ed continued. "Congress is paid a lot of money to do nothing." Jasmine added, "The government should have recognized the danger sooner."

Both noted the impact of rising housing prices and growing social inequality in the area. "Out here, there are a few expensive cars, but a lot of homeless people too," Jasmine noted. "How can anyone make a living anymore when all their money goes to rent?"

While housing speculation has been a boon for real estate developers and financiers, infrastructure has been allowed to decay. State investigators are looking into whether the current fires were caused by poorly maintained power lines owned by the local utility monopoly Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E).

Around the same time the fires broke out Sunday night, dispatchers in Sonoma County received a spate of calls about downed power lines and sparking transformers, as PG&E's outdated infrastructure faltered under heavy winds.

Chris, a volunteer at the Sonoma County Fairgrounds, had sharp words for the utility company: "PG&E does not have a good track record; that's a fact! Why do we still have electrical wires above ground? That's old infrastructure. The poles are around material that's instantly combustible. Really the city should own those wires."

In April PG&E was fined \$8.3 million for failing to maintain a power line that sparked the 2015 Butte Fire in Amador County. In 1994, state regulators fined the company \$30 million over its power lines in the Sierras and prosecutors claimed the company had diverted \$80 million from its tree cutting program to profits.

wsws.org/contact



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit: