

While Southern California burns, governor declares fire devastation to be “new normal”

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Fires continued to rage for an eighth straight day across Southern California on Monday. Though some of the relatively smaller fires in Northeast Los Angeles, Santa Clarita and West Los Angeles are now considered completely or nearly completely contained, larger fires in Ventura, San Diego and Riverside continue to burn.

Since they began last Monday, the fires have collectively destroyed more than 790 structures; 18,000 structures remain under threat according to official estimates.

One person is confirmed dead as a result of the fires while more than 45 horses and an uncounted number of livestock and other animal life have also perished.

The largest blaze, known as the Thomas fire, has burned over 230,000 acres across Santa Barbara and Ventura County. The total size of the fire now exceeds the combined area of the five boroughs of New York City and is nearly a third the size of the state of Rhode Island.

The Thomas fire spread 50,000 acres on Sunday alone, leading officials to order the evacuation of 5,000 residents in Santa Barbara County, while putting another 30,000 on alert. Containment of the fire has dropped from 15 to 10 percent. It is now the fifth largest wildfire in modern California history according to CalFire data.

The southern edge of the Thomas fire was contained by Sunday, but fire continues to fan out in other directions, including northwest along the Pacific coast where it threatens 13,000 residents of the nearby town of Carpinteria.

The town is surrounded by ocean to the south and the steep hillsides of the Los Padres National Forest to the north. Because the hillsides are largely inaccessible to ground crews, Cal Fire personnel are preparing a defensive wall to prevent the fire from encroaching too far into the town. Vegetation and brush surrounding the city have not burned since 1932 heightening the threat of fire, according to Steve Swindle, spokesperson for the Ventura

County Fire Department.

A total of 88,000 residents have been evacuated as a result of the Thomas fire, and Southern California Edison estimates that 85,000 of its customers in the Santa Barbara area are without electrical power. As of Sunday, official estimates place the cost of the Thomas fire alone to be \$25 million. This amount, while large, is equal to a mere 0.025 percent of the net worth of Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos whom Forbes Magazine estimated to be worth \$100.6 billion as of November 2017.

Low-income families, who have few housing options to begin with, have been particularly hard hit by the Thomas fire, which has already destroyed 537 structures itself and damaged 118.

“There are a number of low-income people who have been burned out,” Ventura County Supervisor Steve Bennett said at a town hall on Saturday as reported by the *Washington Post*.

“Many of us are going to have to open up our homes,” he said.

Fortunately, slower wind speeds have been predicted over the coming week. Fire conditions in the Santa Barbara/Ventura area may be exacerbated by unseasonably warm temperatures. A high of 81 degrees Fahrenheit is predicted for Tuesday and a high of 80 degrees is predicted for Wednesday.

The Lilac fire in San Diego County, while 80 percent contained, could cause new fires if strong Santa Ana winds end up spreading embers. The fire has reportedly destroyed 151 structures and damaged 56 others.

The Lilac fire began at approximately 11 a.m. on Thursday and burned through 500 acres in less than 20 minutes before spreading to 4,100 acres that evening.

CalFire, the state agency responsible for fire protection in nearly all the state’s wildlands and rural areas, has reported over 92,000 pounds of retardant and 230,000 gallons of water have been used since the Lilac fire

started. Despite the sheer size and scope of the fire near one of the largest urban areas on the West Coast, CalFire has had to work with 140 fire engines, 17 bulldozers and only 11 helicopters.

Three individuals have suffered burn injuries while another was hospitalized due to smoke inhalation from the Lilac Fire. Three firefighters have also suffered injuries while more than 20,000 San Diego Gas & Electric Customers lost power after the fire began.

Overall, more than 8,500 firefighters have been fighting the fires throughout Southern California since they began last week.

Evacuees face great difficulties, especially those who have lost their homes. For those residents whose homes are still standing, it is unclear when they will be allowed to return.

“As long as the areas are a continued threat, we are going to leave those evacuation orders in place, for safety of life,” Charles Esseling, a spokesman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection or CalFire, said on Sunday.

The hundreds of thousands of families affected by the fires, like their counterparts in Northern California several weeks earlier, are first and foremost, political victims. It is this dawning consciousness which compelled California’s Democratic Governor Jerry Brown to undertake a highly-publicized damage control operation in Southern California over the weekend.

On Saturday, Brown visited the Thomas fire in Ventura. He referred to the extreme weather conditions caused by climate change, which led to the blazes, as “the new normal,” according to KTLA.

“We have to have the resources to combat the fires and we have to also invest in managing vegetation and forests, and all the ways we dwell in this very wonderful place, but a place that’s getting hotter,” Brown said.

Far from attributing damage and loss of life to continuous emergency services and infrastructure cuts, many of which his own administration is responsible for, he instead urged Californians to get used to fires as the “new normal.”

“This is something that happens every year or every few years,” he said. “We’re about to have a firefighting Christmas.”

The governor’s appearances were followed by an interview with the “60 Minutes” news program on Sunday in which he tried to divert blame for the wildfires entirely on the Trump administration.

Brown, a former Jesuit Seminarian, was asked about

Trump’s claim that manmade climate change was a hoax. The governor responded, “I don’t think President Trump has a fear of the Lord, the fear of the wrath of God, which leads one to more humility. And this is such a reckless disregard for the truth and for the existential consequences that can be unleashed.”

In fact, while the Trump administration is directly responsible for a tax reform program which removes deductions for uninsured or underinsured victims of wildfires and blithely ignores the climate change which has resulted in rising temperatures and fire seasons lasting 40 to 50 days longer than the previous century, it was the administration of Brown in California that cut overall disaster assistance from \$52.7 million to \$8.5 million. Only \$2 million had been set aside to help local agencies remove dead or dying trees, many of which have now contributed to the overall devastation of the year’s wildfires.

Once again, despite any rhetorical claims to the contrary, the common unity of class interest between the Democrats and the Republicans and Trump is definitively expressed in their callous response to yet another preventable humanitarian disaster.

The inability to effectively combat and prevent wildfires and other natural disasters does not arise out of the individual political failings of Trump, Brown or any other capitalist politician. It arises out of an economic system which subordinates basic infrastructure maintenance and wildlands management to the drive for profit. The rational utilization of man’s productive forces to fully prevent and combat the devastation caused by fires, hurricanes and other natural disasters requires the socialist reorganization of society by the international working class.



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