

The burning of Notre-Dame cathedral in Paris

Alex Lantier
17 April 2019

Millions of people in France and internationally were stunned and horrified on Monday by the sight of a centuries-old historic monument going up in flames. On Tuesday, as the wreckage strewn across Notre-Dame cathedral was still smoldering, it was clear that Monday's inferno was caused by a horrific breakdown of fire safety in the cathedral's restoration work. Responsibility for this lies with French President Emmanuel Macron's government, and ultimately with the capitalist system.

Europe's most widely-visited monument, immortalized by Victor Hugo's 1831 novel *Notre Dame de Paris* and its film adaptations, has been gutted by a preventable catastrophe. Flames consumed the roof and toppled the spire, whose fall broke open the cathedral's stone vault, raining molten lead and ashes on art work below. Irreplaceable 13th century stained glass windows lie shattered, the main organ is damaged, and the cathedral's interior is a blackened hulk.

International architecture experts are stressing the costly, technically challenging, labor-intensive nature of fire safety in such projects. Heat from blowtorches or power tools—sometimes transmitted long distances via pipes—start fires in wood or dust far from where work is occurring.

When restoring old buildings, said Gerry Tierney of the San Francisco-based firm Perkins and Will, "You have to have a 24-hour fire watch if there has been any heat-source activity going on, because as soon as it breaks out, you've got to have somebody trying to get there as fast as possible."

Catastrophic fires are typically bound up with cost-cutting on fire safety staffing levels, said the University of South Florida's Edward Lewis: "In my experience, it starts with human error, which stems from inadequate supervision levels and disregard for fire prevention procedures... On a lot of construction jobs, the ratio

between supervisors and workers isn't adequate."

Accounts of the fire show that this is what occurred at Notre-Dame. After a first fire alarm sounded in the roof area at 6:20 p.m. on Monday, well after construction workers had gone home, church staff hurriedly checked the vast maze of crisscrossing 13th to 19th century timber holding up the roof. They did not find the fire. At 6:45 p.m., a new fire alarm sounded. This time, within minutes, the extremely old, dry and flammable timber was blazing out of control.

The renovation of Notre-Dame was financed on a shoestring. Two years ago, as church officials sought €100 million for the project, they were forced to mount an international appeal to donors and charities after the French state, which owns the cathedral, shockingly agreed to give only €2 million per year. With the image of the gutted hulk of Notre-Dame now burned into the consciousness of millions of people around the world, it is clear that the resulting levels of fire safety staffing were tragically inadequate.

The burning of Notre-Dame is a horrifying manifestation of destructive processes capitalism has unleashed in every country. The period since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and particularly since the 2008 Wall Street crash, has seen relentless austerity combined with feverish rearmament across Europe. Macron presides over multi-trillion-euro European Union bank bailouts, plans to spend €300 billion on the army by 2023, and billions in tax cuts to the rich.

As a result, every truly vital program is under-funded and every corner is cut. The intended result, deemed perfectly natural by the corporate media and the powers-that-be, is the systematic impoverishment of working people, the slashing of social services, and the defunding of cultural institutions. At times, however, the reckless, selfish and parasitic character of the policies pursued by the financial aristocracy find expression in

the destruction of great monuments of human culture.

During the illegal US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, American occupation troops encouraged the looting of the Iraqi National Museum and stood by as it occurred, leading to the loss of 50,000 artifacts dating back 5,000 years and the destruction of the museum's catalog of its holdings. Then-US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld endorsed the looting, declaring, "Free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes."

The burning of Notre Dame is not in the final analysis separate from such bloody acts of plunder, including the looting of the old city of Palmyra by NATO's Islamist proxy militias in the Syrian war. It flows from policies carried out by the same ruling class, with the same essential aims.

Macron, despised by workers in France as the "president of the rich," subordinates every question to the financial aristocracy's drive for self-enrichment. His tax cuts for the rich allowed billionaire Bernard Arnault to increase his personal wealth by over €22 billion last year alone.

In the 1938 manifesto "Towards a Free Revolutionary Art," drafted jointly by Leon Trotsky and French poet André Breton, the authors wrote: "We can say without exaggeration that never before has civilization been menaced so seriously as today. The Vandals, with instruments which were barbarous, and so comparatively ineffective, blotted out the culture of antiquity in one corner of Europe. But today we see world civilization, united in its historic destiny, reeling under the blows of reactionary forces armed with the entire arsenal of modern technology."

These lines find devastating confirmation in the fate of the Paris cathedral. Notre-Dame passed unscathed through over eight centuries since construction began in 1163. It survived the historical upheavals of the French Revolution, the Paris Commune of 1871, World War I and the Nazi Occupation. It could not, however, survive the first two decades of the 21st century and the reign of Emmanuel Macron.

Today, the diktat of the financial aristocracy is encountering rising political opposition and militant strike activity by the international working class. Strikes by US teachers and symphony orchestra musicians, wildcat walkouts by Mexican maquiladora workers, and strikes by plantation workers and civil servants on the Indian subcontinent are unfolding as

"yellow vests" in France and workers in Algeria mobilize in struggle against Macron and his allies in the Algerian military dictatorship.

Yesterday, two of France's richest billionaires, Bernard Arnault and François Pinault, announced donations of €200 million and €100 million, respectively, to help rebuild Notre-Dame. Their donations, a small fraction of their immense wealth, were made to head off mounting public anger at their exorbitant wealth. They only underscore the waste and anarchy produced by the billionaires' domination over public life. These sums, which should have been made available to renovate Notre-Dame before the fire, will doubtless be insufficient to fund what will be a multi-year, multi-billion-euro reconstruction project.

Vast political lessons flow from the devastation of Notre-Dame. Only a few hundred meters from Notre-Dame lies the Louvre museum, created initially by the nationalization of the royal art collections during the French Revolution in 1793, amid the expropriation of the feudal aristocracy and the guillotining of King Louis XVI. The Louvre, the French revolutionaries proclaimed, should be "a sanctuary where the peoples will elevate themselves by becoming conscious of beauty."

The way forward for the emerging movement of the international working class against the financial aristocracy of the 21st century is a turn towards its revolutionary traditions and a struggle for the expropriation of the oligarchy and the breaking of its stranglehold over social and political life.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)