

Canada: Alberta wildfires force evacuations, threaten air quality

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More than 11,000 residents of northern Alberta towns have been temporarily evacuated over the past few weeks by the police and armed forces due to out-of-control wildfires. These include the Town of High Level, the Dene Tha' First Nation communities of Bushe River, Meander River and Chateh, the Paddle Prairie Metis Settlement, Wabasca, and the Bigstone Cree Nation.

On Tuesday an 8-hour evacuation alert for the Town of Slave Lake, much of which was destroyed by a wildfire in 2011, was downgraded to 12 hours. However, officials say that the fire near the town, which currently covers an area three times the size of Edmonton, could continue to burn for several months.

In terms of square hectares, wildfires across the province consumed—just in the month of May—four times the average yearly Alberta fire season burn of 500,000 hectares.

Alberta's newly elected United Conservative Party (UCP) government and Premier Jason Kenney are adamantly insisting that there is no connection between the wildfires and climate change. Yet, the scope of the fires at this stage of the wildfire season is unprecedented.

Moreover, in Alberta, neighbouring British Columbia, and internationally there has been a significant spike in the number and intensity of wildfires, which scientists attribute at least in part to hotter, dryer weather, increased winds and other changes in weather patterns.

During a May 30 speech to Calgary business owners, Kenney shrugged off criticism of his dismissal of climate change, saying, "We've always had forest fires. We always will." He also took aim at the federal Liberal government's carbon tax, which he has vowed to repeal, declaring, "They've had a carbon tax in

British Columbia for 10 years. It hasn't made a difference to the pattern of forest fires there...or in Alberta."

Shortly after Kenney's press officer had cynically tweeted that the premier's speech was "pure fire," government officials were tacitly forced to acknowledge the unprecedented character of the fires when the high level of smoke in the air forced the cancellation of an outdoor press conference.

The smoke has been severely affecting air quality in Edmonton, Alberta's capital and second largest city, and surrounding communities. On May 30, ash covered steps, roofs, cars and windows, and thick smoke severely limited visibility. At times, people traversing Edmonton's High Level Bridge could not see either an adjacent bridge or the downtown skyline, and the city had to turn on streetlights well before nightfall.

More significantly, air quality readings for that day by the Alberta Capital Airshed station hit 1,800 micrograms of dangerous particulate matter per cubic meter. In the 20 years since air-quality monitoring began in Edmonton, no reading of over 500 has ever been recorded.

The particles in smoke are so small that they can be carried deep into the lungs, where the body thinks they are foreign bacteria and tries to kill them, causing the lungs to get inflamed. These particles can also cross into the blood stream, causing inflammation throughout the body. Most at risk are pregnant women and newborns with highly sensitive lungs.

Researchers have determined that the rate of heart attacks increases 1 percent, and the rate of respiratory illness increases 7 percent for each 10-microgram increase in these small smoke particles. The inflammation can reduce the flow nutrients across the placenta in pregnant women, resulting in lower birth

weights. At 30 micrograms, health officials recommend rescheduling children's outdoor activities.

Alberta does not even have ground-level air-quality monitors in much of its central and northwest regions. The only information available is from Environment Canada. Because provincial health officials lack data and the path of low-level smoke is hard to predict, they are severely hampered in issuing timely local air-quality warnings.

The refusal of the UCP government to accept the role climate change is playing in creating this public health disaster is bound up with its contempt for ordinary working people and its close ties to the province's oil companies. To defend Big Oil's multibillion-dollar profits and further its plans to intensify the exploitation of Alberta's tar sands, the Kenney government is repealing the limited environmental restrictions that the previous New Democrats (NDP) government imposed on the oil companies.

While Kenney's UCP is the most brazen in its support for the oil companies and dismissal of the increased wildfire risk resulting from climate change, its contempt for the threat posed to the health, homes and livelihoods of working people is shared by the entire political establishment.

The fires now raging across northern Alberta and much of western Canada are not surprising or random events; they have long been predicted.

The inability of capitalist governments at the federal and provincial levels to offer any response to the social and environmental crisis is bound up with the fact that successive governments of all political stripes, including the NDP, have slashed firefighting budgets, failed to heed the warnings of scientists about the devastating environmental impact of the ruthless exploitation of Alberta's tar sands, and rejected taking basic preventive measures to guard against the destruction of property and lives by wildfires.

This was graphically demonstrated three years ago during the massive Fort McMurray wildfire, which forced 90,000 people to flee their homes and destroyed more than 2,000 homes. Canada's prime minister, Justin Trudeau, speaking in the immediate aftermath of the blaze, criticized any attempt to offer a "political explanation" for the wildfire, infamously declaring, "There have always been fires. There have always been floods."

Governments across Canada and around the world are incapable of dealing with the destruction wrought by climate change. It is the most vulnerable, the poor and other working people, who suffer most, often losing everything. Many of the communities most impacted in Alberta are indigenous.

Wildfires are currently burning right across western Canada, from British Columbia to northern Ontario. Meanwhile, in another perverse outcome related to climate change, parts of Ontario, Quebec and the Atlantic provinces have been hit this spring by large-scale flooding, just two years after weathering the so-called flood of the century.

The technological know-how and scientific understanding exist to mitigate, if not entirely prevent environmental disasters like wildfires. But they can only be brought to bear in a society that prioritizes the social needs of the vast majority over the boosting of corporate profits. Moreover, as the global scale of wildfires becomes clear, with major blazes striking Canada, the US, Germany, Australia, and Sweden over the past year, to mention only some of the countries affected, the need for an international response becomes all the more urgent. Implementing such a response, and developing the no-less-urgent global strategy to tackle climate change, require the political mobilization of the working class to bring about the socialist reorganization of society, so as to end production for profit and the system of rival capitalist nation-states in which it is historically rooted.



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