

California wildfires: A climate crisis embedded in the COVID-19 pandemic

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Thousands of Californians are being evacuated in Central California due to an explosion of wildfires, exacerbated by a damaging heat wave. Smoke from the fires is affecting San Francisco and the surrounding metropolitan area, endangering the health of more than five million residents. Air quality in Southern California has also worsened significantly.

At last count there were one hundred fires raging across California. A heat wave of historic proportions is affecting the entire state. Last Sunday temperatures reached 107 degrees Fahrenheit (41.7 Celsius) in coastal Santa Cruz, south of San Francisco, and 130 degrees Fahrenheit in Death Valley (54.4 Celsius) on the California-Nevada Border, one of the hottest temperatures ever recorded. Temperatures along the agricultural Central Valley exceeded 110 degrees F (38.3 C). The heat wave has triggered numerous lightning storms (“firenadoes”) that are igniting the dry vegetation beneath.

The entire state has been affected and a state of emergency has been declared. There are not enough fire crews (the fire-fighting system relies in part on prison labor), airplanes and helicopters to adequately put out the fires.

This week California Governor Gavin Newsom (a Democrat) openly admitted that, while this climate crisis had been anticipated, the state was not prepared for the current situation. A simple question arises: Why?

A recent article in the *Los Angeles Times* likened the current heat wave and fire emergency to the 2006 heat wave that “resulted in thousands of emergency room visits for heat-related illness and hundreds of excess deaths.” Medical experts “are bracing for a jump in such heat casualties, which they fear will be worsened by the closure of air-conditioned public spaces due to

coronavirus restrictions,” the newspaper reported.

Scientists are also concerned that the heat wave is not abating, due to high humidity and high nighttime temperatures, making it harder for people to cool off, “increasing the risk of heat strokes, dehydration and other ailments. Extreme heat also increases the risk of complications for people with a spectrum of chronic illnesses including kidney disease, cardiovascular disease and diabetes.”

Three meteorological events combined are producing this heat and wildfire emergency: a heat wave affecting the western part of the US, Tropical Storm Elida, and a thunderstorm in northern Mexico. This combination of heat, moisture and high pressure resulted in lightning strikes and tornado-like winds.

Like the COVID-19 pandemic, this weather pattern and the wildfires are entirely predictable and are the direct result of the global warming crisis. This has raised average temperatures in California and across the world, as carbon dioxide levels continue to increase the number of wildfires. California’s “fire season” starts earlier and lasts longer each year. In 2018 there were 78 more “fire days” than in 1968. Fires have also gotten deadlier and larger.

Even before the heat wave, and before the pandemic broke out in force, there were predictions in April that the current fire season would be worse than others due to the lack of snow accumulation in the northern California mountains, creating drier conditions at higher altitudes, potential fuel for high altitude wildfires. So far in 2020 there have been over 6,000 wildfires, including the hundreds that are currently burning, compared to a total of a little over 8,000 in 2019.

However, the response to all three natural calamities reveals a criminal lack of preparation in the state. There

are not enough firefighters and not enough equipment.

During the last few decades, much of the “hand work” in fighting fires was done by state prisoners. Typically, crews of 17 prisoners each are deployed every wildfire season. Prisoners are paid a miserable stipend of between \$2 and \$5 per day and \$1 per hour. At times, working 24-hour shifts, these so-called volunteers are brutally exploited. They are used for back-breaking tasks, such as cutting fire breaks around communities. Up until this year, there were more than 2200 prisoner-firefighters.

When not fighting fires, inmate firefighters carry out conservation and community service projects, performing a wide range of duties, such as clearing brush and fallen trees to reduce the chance of fire, maintaining parks, sand bagging, flood protection and reforestation.

Despite their performance and training, after their release the ex-prisoners are not allowed to become civilian fire fighters. Even before the current coronavirus pandemic the number of eligible prisoners was declining. This year 77 crews were formed before the pandemic set in, down from 90 in 2019. By late June, the rate of COVID-19 infections among prisoner fire crews had placed 12 of the 43 northern California inmate fire crews out of commission, following a massive coronavirus outbreak in the Lassen County Prison, where prison fire crews are trained. Since then the lockdown lowered the number of crews available to 30.

There is also not enough capacity in the electricity grid to respond to heat waves that are becoming increasingly common. A 2018 Statewide Summary Report warned of the coming shortage of electricity due to the changing climate conditions.

On August 14, as temperatures were rising, the manager of California’s Independent System Operator (ISO), which manages the electricity grid, called on utilities to cut power to hundreds of thousands. Such rolling blackouts had not taken place in the state since May 2001, when, as a result of market manipulation by the Enron Corporation, millions were denied electricity in a series of rolling blackouts.

Over the weekend the ISO restricted electric supply to California’s electricity and power monopolies. The blackouts affected over 400,000 people.

Once again, these devastating developments have the

power to reveal the inability of the capitalist system to utilize its enormous social resources to protect lives and the environment. Instead, the state hands out trillions to banks with no strings attached and a tiny oligarchy reaps unprecedented profits while working people look death in the eye on a daily basis.



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