Wildfires devastate US West Coast

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The massive wildfires ravaging the West Coast of the United States continue to burn unabated. More than 100 active fires are raging across the region, including the largest fires in the history of Washington state and California, with the fire season expected to last until at least October or November. The governments of California, Oregon and Washington have all declared a state of emergency.

On Thursday night, authorities announced seven new deaths attributable to the North Complex fire in Butte County, California, bringing the total death toll in the state to 19. At least 25 people have now died in the fires across the West Coast, with dozens of people missing in the region and hundreds of thousands displaced from their homes.

As with the criminal mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, the mass devastation wrought by the wildfires exposes the complete inability of capitalism to address any social problem. While the fires may be considered a "natural disaster," the unprecedented destruction is a product of the subordination of all aspects of society to the profit interests of the financial oligarchy.

The ruling class has done nothing to address climate change, which in recent decades has created ever deeper droughts and longer and more intense wildfire seasons. State budgets have been cut to the bone, leaving fire departments drastically under-staffed and ill-prepared to handle such massive fires. So far this year, wildfires across California, Oregon and Washington have burned millions of acres of forest and decimated small mountain communities.

The fires have filled the air with ash and smoke, compromising air quality and shrouding the densely populated metropolitan regions of Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Los Angeles and other cities in an apocalyptic orange haze akin to images of Mars. Portland, Seattle and San Francisco now have the worst air quality in the world, while Los Angeles ranks seventh worst.

Fine particulate matter released by the fires will cause permanent lung damage to millions of residents and threatens the lives of tens of thousands of people with respiratory conditions. Those with heart, lung or vascular diseases are now at higher risk for stroke and heart attack. The poor air quality weakens the immune systems of even healthy people, placing the region's population of roughly 50 million people at greater risk of contracting COVID-19, while those who do contract the virus will suffer exacerbated symptoms.

According to official counts, which are generally considered significant underestimates, roughly 186,000 homeless people live in California, Oregon and Washington, many of whom lack access to indoor shelter and are now forced to endure unbearable breathing conditions on the streets. The limited supply of hotel vouchers provided by the Democratic-led state governments has quickly dried up, forcing thousands more people to live in their cars.

The majority of the fires began as the result of dry lightning strikes, triggered by record-breaking, triple-digit heat waves. The extreme heat, combined with very low to no humidity and the drying out of thousands of acres of forestry, has created tinderbox conditions. These arid conditions also encourage the infestation of certain types of beetles that weaken and kill trees, which in turn feeds the wildfires.

The speed at which the fires have spread has broken records, with the Bear Creek fire in California tearing through roughly 230,000 acres in approximately 24 hours. Daniel Swain, a climate scientist at the University of California, Los Angeles, told the *New York Times:* "It's really shocking to see the number of fast-moving, extremely large and destructive fires simultaneously burning. I've spoken to maybe two dozen fire and climate experts over the last 48 hours and pretty much everyone is at a loss for words. There's certainly been nothing in living memory on this scale."

California

Across the state, at least 19 fatalities have been reported, over 3.1 million acres have been burned, and over 6,000 structures have been destroyed. There have been 7,700 wildfire "incidents" so far this year.

On Thursday, the August Complex Fire, located 150 miles north of San Francisco, became the largest fire in the state's history at 746,755 acres, far surpassing the Mendocino Fire of 2018, which burned 459,123 acres. The fire complex, only 24 percent contained, is the result of the merger of multiple fires and is now larger than the state of Rhode Island.

Several other major fires continue to burn in Northern California, including the North Complex fire in the foothills to the Sierra Nevada, northwest of Sacramento, and the Creek Fire, northeast of Fresno, both of which have led to the evacuation of thousands of people.

In Southern California, the SQF Lightning Complex has burned 35,674 acres and remains wholly uncontained despite burning for nearly a month. The Apple Fire, which began on July 31 and is 95 percent contained, has been one of the longest-burning fires. The Dolan fire has burned 73,089 acres and is 40 percent contained.

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The Lake Fire is 90 percent contained and has burned 12 structures. The Valley Fire, east of San Diego, has burned nearly 18,000 acres and is only 39 percent contained.

Oregon

With 39 fires burning through the state, over 500,000 residents have been told to prepare to evacuate from their homes, representing over 10 percent of the state's population. At least 14 people have been killed, almost 1 million acres have been burned, and hundreds of homes and commercial buildings have been destroyed.

Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler issued an emergency order on Thursday as "extreme wildfire conditions threatening lives and property" grew closer to the metropolitan area of 2.4 million people. Saturated with smoke from the 39 fires raging across Oregon, the city's air quality index registered at 379 on Friday, according to the Office of Emergency Management--a level that can be described as "hazardous" to human health. The air quality is currently considered the worst of all major cities in the world.

The city order closes parks, directs homeless people to "elocate as quickly as possible to safer areas," and activates evacuation sites for fire victims. The order does not provide any resources or safe evacuation areas for the city's homeless.

The Beachie Creek and Riverside fires, close to the town of Estacada—24 miles outside of Portland—were threatening to merge on Friday, as they were separated by only one mile. A merger of the wildfires would increase the intensity due to "plume dominated" fire behavior. The towns of Estacada and nearby Molalla have been evacuated.

With nearly 3,000 firefighters deployed against fires tearing through rural areas, several towns in the western part of the state have been completely decimated. The chief of the Oregon Department of Forestry estimates that another 3,000 firefighters are needed, highlighting the urgent need for more firefighters and resources to combat the fires. "This could be the greatest loss of human lives and property due to wildfire in our state's history," Oregon Governor Kate Brown warned at a recent press conference. "We have never seen this amount of uncontained fire across our state."

Washington

There are approximately 15 active fires in Washington state, with over 500,000 acres having been burned in the span of just a few days. The Pearl Hill and Cold Springs Canyon fires are threatening to merge together. A one-year-old boy was tragically killed in the Cold Springs fire, and both of his parents remain in critical condition with severe burns. The Cold Springs Canyon fire is only 25 percent contained at present, while the Pearl Hill fire is 50 percent contained. In total, over 200 homes and structures have been lost with close to 800 more threatened.

The Olympic Peninsula has been especially affected by poor air quality. A dense and massive plume of smoke has moved north from the Oregon fires. Cooler winds are expected soon, which will bring more smoke particles from the southwest.

California, Oregon and Washington are all dominated by the Democratic Party, which has overseen decades of budget cuts. These cuts have deepened as a result of the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, which will further undermine the already insufficient funding for much needed resources to combat the growing number of fires.

In California, Governor Gavin Newsom supported cutting $681 million from this year's state budget for environmental protection. Oregon lawmakers recently proposed $400 million in budget cuts, as a budget writing subcommittee kicked off its July meeting by proposing to delay much needed wildfire equipment purchases.

Scientists have been warning for decades that climate change will have catastrophic consequences for the world's population. The devastating wildfires gripping the West Coast mark a qualitative deepening of a years-long process of worsening wildfire seasons. They follow similar record-setting wildfires across Australia last year. The underlying cause of these immense crises is the capitalist system, in which all of society's resources are controlled by a tiny layer of parasitic oligarchs.

The massive social dislocation caused by the wildfires, like the deadly COVID-19 pandemic, is a testament to the inability of capitalism to serve the interests of the vast majority of the population. Only through the socialist transformation of society will the working class be able to stop the devastating wildfires, halt and reverse climate change, put an end to the pandemic and ensure that social needs take precedence over private profit.

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