

US farmworkers labor under unsafe conditions as West Coast fires continue to rage

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As of Monday, many of the wildfires that began burning in California on August 15 had yet to be fully contained and are contributing to a dramatic decline in air quality across the state.

According to the latest tally, at least 35 people have been killed by the fires in California, Oregon and Washington. Tens of thousands have been forced to flee in the face of rapidly advancing flames which have destroyed entire communities.

The SCU Lightning Complex that ignited nearly a month ago, affecting multiple locations east of the San Francisco Bay Area and Silicon Valley (397,000 acres burned), the LNU Lightning Complex in California's wine counties (364,000 acres), the Lake Fire in Los Angeles' National Forest (31,000 acres), and the Butte/Tehama/Glen Lightning Complex in the northern part of the state (20,000 acres) have been largely contained but are still active and involve hundreds of fire-fighting crews.

Other fires have yet to be fully or even partially contained, including the North Complex Fire (261,000 acres), the Creek Fire in Fresno and Modesto Counties (213,000 acres), the Bobcat fire in Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties, south of San Francisco (36,000 acres) and the El Dorado Fire (14,000 acres) in San Bernardino and Riverside Counties east of Los Angeles. Crews have yet to be assigned to over a dozen major fires.

The nearly 500,000 field workers that labor in California's Central Valley and in the wine region, picking lettuce, strawberries, citrus, grapes, and other crops are among the most severely affected as they have been displaced or continue to labor under adverse conditions.

Workers are being choked by smoke and forced to crowd into emergency shelters in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic which, according to a Bloomberg count, has seen 100,000 confirmed coronavirus infections among the total of 3 million migratory and seasonal laborers in the US. There has been no serious effort to test, trace or even document all of the cases among this section of the working class.

A majority of these workers are undocumented, others are migrant workers possessing H2 temporary visas. They pay exorbitant rents and are forced to live in crowded and unsanitary conditions. Hundreds of workers sleep in trailers and automobiles parked near the fields in which they work.

While wages have improved since the militant struggles of the 1960s, with field workers typically receiving minimum wage (although often less), they face varying work schedules, and periods of unemployment. Many of the field workers are hired through contractors who extract their profits at the workers' expense.

While the state claims to have distributed millions of N95 masks to agricultural workers, various reports document that less than 10 percent have confirmed they received them.

Since the fires begun, 27 days ago, readings on the Air Quality Index (AQI) have been consistently in the unhealthy and hazardous ranges, with some areas on the West Coast having readings which were off the charts. The AQI measures four pollutants: ground-level ozone, particle pollution, carbon monoxide, and sulfur dioxide using standard formulas developed by the federal Environmental Protection Agency and ranks them on a scale from 0 to 500.

Farm workers are being forced to labor in those conditions, risking permanent lung damage and increased vulnerability to COVID-19 infections. Hundreds of thousands are working in hazardous conditions where the AQI is often well above 150 and in certain areas it even surpasses the dreadful 500 maximum.

Farmworkers are so afraid of retaliation from their employers who threaten their immigration status that they have endured the unhealthiest conditions for very long. Carina, a farmworker near Bakersfield, told CalMatters that she could not breathe at the end of August when the AQI exceeded 160. She was told that she would not get a mask unless an inspector visited the field.

The United Farm Workers (UFW) union, elevated by the struggles of the 1965-1975 strike, at one time boasted a membership of 100,000 workers. Those struggles were betrayed in the 1970s and 1980s, as the UFW, under the leadership of César Chavez, adopted a policy of labor-management cooperation and attachment to the Democratic Party. Currently it has about 10,000 members in California and the Pacific Northwest, not all of whom are farm workers.

On its Facebook page, the UFW announced a limited campaign to distribute masks to field workers and suggested that the owners do the same. While the masks do help prevent COVID-19 infections among workers, they have no effect on the air that they breathe, including the minute soot particles that penetrate deep into the lungs, making workers and their families even more vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus.

Meanwhile, the UFW is actively supporting the Joe Biden- Kamala Harris presidential ticket, on the pretext that the Democratic Party supports the struggle of farmworkers and immigrants, a gross distortion of reality. Biden served as vice president for eight years in the Obama administration, which was responsible for deporting millions and building up the infrastructure which President Donald Trump is currently using to wage his own crackdown on immigrants and those opposed to police violence.

The struggle of farm workers against the double impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and environmental catastrophe, in California and the Pacific Northwest, cannot be left in the hands of organizations such as the UFW. Farmworkers must organize independent health

and safety committees across California and the Pacific Northwest and reach out to teachers, autoworkers, health workers and other sections of the working class across the US and internationally to prepare for joint strike action in defense of their health and livelihoods.

The defense of health and safety, of immigrant rights, and of living standards cannot be left in the hands of the Republicans or Democrats. Only the Socialist Equality Party presidential candidates, Joseph Kishore and Norissa Santa Cruz, are fighting for the necessary socialist policies, for workers' control of production and for a global solution to the climate crisis behind the disastrous fires in the West Coast and around the world.



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