

# As Creek Fire become the largest in California history, farmworkers continue to labor without protection from smoke

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The Creek Fire, in Fresno and Madera Counties of California's Central Valley, has now become the largest single fire in the state's recorded history smothering large parts of the state in smoke. Farm workers continue to harvest the West Coast's highly valuable cash crops, such as wine and table grapes, with minimal protections from either smoke or COVID-19. This leaves one of the most exploited and vulnerable sections of the US working class with compromised respiratory systems as the pandemic continues to spread out of control.

Since it began on September 4, the Creek Fire has burned nearly 290,000 acres and has damaged or destroyed at least 926 structures, threatening over 6,700 more. Despite this staggering toll, which has blanketed Yosemite Valley and much of the region in smoke, the fire remains only 32 percent contained. This means that it will continue to produce high levels of smoke for some time to come, affecting not only nearby residents but those living downwind as far away as Michigan.

The Director of Air Quality Science and Planning at San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District Joe Klassen told ABC 30, "Just thinking back in history, I don't think we've had a widespread event with this many high concentrations for this prolonged of a period."

Despite Fresno County declaring a state of emergency two weeks ago, farm workers remain in the fields with minimal protections. Even though plans were announced over a month ago by the Fresno County Farm Bureau to distribute hundreds of thousands of N95 masks to area farmworkers, few workers have received these masks, which provide a high level of protection against both air pollution and COVID-19.

Juanita Ontiveros, an attorney at the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, who observes farmworker conditions, spoke to CapRadio of the conditions facing farmworkers at the beginning of this year's fire season in August, "The air is suffocating, you can smell the smoke,

thick—you can literally taste it. And the particles, you see people spitting things out. It is like a thick rain of ashes falling down," Ontiveros said. "They're coughing, their eyes are watery and red and itchy, many of the crews are being let go earlier, though not all labor contractors and growers are sensitive to the workers' needs."

A farmworker in Kern County, south of Fresno County, reported last week to the *World* that her supervisor, employed by farm labor contractor Hronis, Inc., had a number of N95 masks but would only distribute them if an inspector arrived.

Even if adequate masks were distributed to farmworkers, workers would likely have difficulty wearing them in the brutal Central Valley summer heat without additional relief from their regular grueling work schedules.

With the fall harvest at hand for crops such as table and wine grapes, workers are generally paid based on the quantity of produce they are able to harvest, rather than on an hourly or daily rate. As a result, workers are effectively coerced by their low wages to work through breaks to earn sufficient wages, with a single worker often harvesting as many as two tons of grapes in a single shift. It is not possible for many workers to maintain this rate while wearing a mask without getting dangerously overheated.

A recently published UC Davis study conducted during California's 2018 wildfire season found that even "when farmworkers were offered protective masks, many found them difficult to use while working due to heat-related discomfort and chafing. Others believed wearing two bandanas over mouth and nose would provide just as much protection."

"Many farmworkers will continue working, even in unsafe conditions, to support their families. They don't have many other options," Heather Riden, the lead author of the study, explained.

In a report earlier this month, The Intercept found that despite active evacuation warnings, wine growers in

Northern California's Sonoma County were allowed by the county's agriculture commissioner to "invite" farmworkers to continue the harvest.

This move, which was allowed to continue by the Democrat-controlled state government, clearly illustrates the priorities of the Democratic Party. They are content to risk the lives of workers, particularly largely undocumented farmworkers who surely had little choice but to accept their employers "invitation," to ensure the continued profitability of large agricultural landowners. This is the general response of the Democratic Party to the health and safety of the working class as fires and the pandemic continue to spread.

Farm revenue in California, much of which comes from Central Valley totals tens of billions of dollars each year, with grapes alone bringing in over \$10 billion in 2019. Despite this, only 5 to 11 percent of California's more than 500,000 agricultural workers have employer provided health insurance coverage. And just 7 to 11 percent have Medicaid despite many more working for poverty wages. An estimated 75 percent of California's farmworkers are undocumented immigrants, who are often not eligible for any medical benefits.

Due in part to the seasonal nature of the work, California farmworkers earn extremely low annual wages. In 2015, the average California farmworker earned about \$17,500 per year, barely more than the cost of rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Fresno.

Thus, farmworkers tend to live in close quarters, often in multigenerational households. This contributes to the Central Valley having some of the worst COVID-19 transmission rates in California. A majority of counties in the Central Valley have the most severe designation of widespread transmission, with over 4 new cases per day 100,000 residents and test positivity rates above 4 percent.

After over a month of breathing toxic air with little to no protection, farmworkers are at particularly high risk of severe COVID-19, which hits those with compromised respiratory systems the hardest.

In a belated attempt to cover for its criminally negligent role in both of the above disasters, the Democratic Party has passed several bills in the state legislature which are currently awaiting Governor Gavin Newsom's signature.

The first would include an increase in workplace safety enforcement through the California Occupational Safety and Health Administration (Cal/OSHA), COVID-19-related paid sick leave and workers' compensation benefits, and a bilingual campaign to educate agricultural workers on Cal/OSHA guidance. Many undocumented farmworkers in California speak indigenous languages of Mexico and Central America and thus would not benefit from a bilingual campaign in English and Spanish. The second would expand

rural telehealth, and the third an expansion of electronic filing in the state's shuttered courthouses.

In fact, a 2019 law already requires California employers to provide protective equipment, such as N95 masks, to employees forced to work outdoors when the air quality index rises above 151, the "Unhealthy" level. Despite this, there is no discussion among the Democrats of holding employers accountable for violating the law.

In recent press conferences, Newsom and Jay Inslee, Democratic Governor of Washington, have been quick to talk abstractly about climate change as the source of the fires but have said next to nothing about the effects of these wildfires on working people.

The present conditions illustrate the inadequacy of the above-mentioned push for increased agricultural personal protective equipment and a paltry \$25 million to provide "temporary isolation spaces" for agricultural workers infected by or exposed to COVID-19 during an inevitable outbreak during harvest season.

Amid all this, the United Farm Workers union (UFW), which once commanded the allegiance of hundreds of thousands of farm workers, particularly in the grape industry, offers nothing more than appeals to the Democratic Party. The union's website notes the failures of mask distribution and unsafe conditions. However, their sole demand is an appeal to the Democratic Party, calling for increased safety enforcement through Cal/OSHA. This is the same basic role the unions played in the aftermath of the destructive 2018 California wildfire season. Even though wildfires have become nearly a yearly occurrence, the unions remain inert.

It is not safe for farm workers to be in the fields with dangerous air quality. It is doubly unsafe for farm workers to continue working at a breakneck pace, living in cramped conditions for poverty wages without adequate healthcare during a pandemic. Workers must demand livable wages, adequate protective equipment with cool-down breaks and full health coverage.

To fight for these and other demands, we call on farmworkers to form rank-and-file safety committees, independent and in opposition to the Democrats, the Republicans and the trade unions.



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