

Wildfires continue to rage across western United States

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Wildfires continue to ravage the western United States after weeks of destruction spanning across California, Oregon, Montana and Idaho, among other states. This ongoing disaster has underlined the severity of the climate crisis and its horrific effects.

At the time of publication, according to Cal Fire, California continues to battle 24 major wildfires throughout the state, with the total number of evacuees currently at over 96,000 and the death toll at 30. Since the beginning of this year, there have been over 8,100 wildfires which have been responsible for the destruction of over 3.9 million acres in California.

Meanwhile, other states have also felt the sharp effects of these fires, with currently 11 active wildfires in Oregon, 14 in Idaho and 10 in Montana, according to the National Interagency Fire Center.

However, these wildfires, which have claimed dozens of lives and caused thousands to be evacuated throughout the western region, did not just happen by chance but are rather a direct byproduct of the climate crisis facing humanity.

Record-hot temperatures, and the vastly arid conditions that result from it, have been found by scientists to be a significant cause of the growing prevalence of wildfires.

The correlation between these fires and global warming have fallen on deaf ears within the political establishment, however. President Donald Trump continues to blatantly ignore the climate catastrophe, going so far as to negate the opinions of experts when asked to acknowledge the link between wildfires and climate change during his fly-by visit to California on September 14.

Rather, Trump continues to reiterate a false narrative that forest management or lack thereof is largely responsible for the havoc wreaked in the western

region, trying to shift the blame to the state agencies in charge of forestry. Ironically enough, in California for example, 57 percent of forests are controlled by the federal government.

In fact, when asked about climate change at the September 29 debacle of a presidential debate, Trump diverted the question to the wildfires, utilizing his classic tactic of downplaying the obvious and denial of scientific facts.

He stated, “You can’t every year have hundreds of thousands of acres of land just burned to the ground—that’s burning down because of a lack of management.”

Despite these absurd claims, the wildfires of 2020 have underlined the severity of the climate catastrophe and its deep social repercussions. The destruction of homes and livelihoods, the fact that overnight tens of thousands of people have been made homeless, putting even more stress on a virtually non-existent welfare net, emphasizes the dire need to properly address the issues at hand.

Strikingly, the year 2020 has set a historic precedent in the United States for the most amount of time spent in evacuation shelters. According to data provided by the American Red Cross, the organization has provided approximately 807,454 nights of shelter through September 25 to those who have fallen victim to natural disasters (this number also includes those affected by hurricanes).

This staggering data points to how global warming can and will exacerbate the housing crisis, increasing the number of climate refugees—a number that can only worsen in the coming years as large-scale disasters continue to reach unprecedented heights.

For some, this reality is nothing new—those who lost their homes and businesses in wildfire disasters from

years prior again face the same grim possibility.

In Paradise, California, for example, residents were hit with evacuation warnings from county officials due to the North Complex Fire's vast spread. Tragically, Paradise is still in the process of both physically and economically rebuilding from the 2018 Camp Fire, which destroyed virtually the entire town, with over 18,000 structures decimated and 85 fatalities.

For others, the massive wildfires not only threaten to demolish their homes and livelihoods, but their health as well, especially for those whose jobs depend on working outdoors.

Farmworkers in California are exposed to highly dangerous air quality as they work the fields, such as in the Central Valley, an agricultural area bordered by swarming wildfires.

Personal protective equipment (PPE), such as N95 masks, were mandated last year by California's Division of Occupational Safety and Health (Cal/OSHA) to be provided by employers during wildfire season. According to one poll, 84 percent of farm workers (of the 350 who responded) were not provided a mask by their employers.

On the surface, wildfire smoke can result in burning eyes, dizziness and coughing. However, on a much deeper level, prolonged exposure to toxic smoke has been found to lead to chronic health conditions, such as damage to the respiratory system, especially for those with preexisting health conditions.

Those who work in the fields oftentimes do not have the luxury to choose between their health and their jobs. A large number of farmworkers are undocumented, leaving them ineligible to receive unemployment insurance benefits or any other social services even during these times of crises. This undocumented status also tends to stifle complaints for fear of retaliation or deportation, leaving these individuals with no choice but to continue to show up to work and put their health at risk, facing the possibility of exposure to noxious levels of smoke and to COVID-19.

Despite their lack of access to necessary resources—be it rental assistance, unemployment insurance or PPE—farmworkers have been deemed “essential workers” during the COVID-19 pandemic, yet are continuously shown by employers and the elite that their lives and their health are disposable.

The chaotic conditions of 2020, and the lack of effective leadership and social infrastructure, whether it comes to addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, the wildfires and their link to global warming, the climate refugee crisis and the plight of workers, have all exemplified the dire consequences of a capitalist state and its failure to address the needs of the people.

The international mobilization of the working class under a genuine socialist program would be the only feasible and effective solution to the disastrous consequences of the failed capitalist state.



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