

100,000 under evacuation order as wildfire threatens Irvine, California

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On Tuesday, Southern California Edison (SCE), the utility company that monopolizes electricity delivery in Southern California, announced that its equipment may have sparked a wildfire just outside the city of Irvine in Orange County.

Almost 100,000 people were under evacuation order and two firefighters were seriously injured by the 11-square-mile Silverado fire, driven by powerful winds that over the weekend had prompted electric power cuts in Northern California to tens of thousands of households.

The wildfire in Orange County broke out in Silverado Canyon, which runs just east of the city of Irvine (population 280,000), southeast of Los Angeles. In addition to causing the evacuation of many residents, it endangered the air quality in Los Angeles and Orange Counties. The injured firefighters were hospitalized with third-degree burns all over their bodies.

Without fully admitting fault, SCE announced that it was still studying the origins of the conflagration. It appears that a “lashing wire” that tied a telecommunications line to a support cable hit the 12,000-volt line above it, possibly due to a wind gust.

As a precaution against other wind gusts knocking down equipment or damaging power lines and triggering more fires, SCE shut off power to about 38,000 customers in five Southern California counties, including in the area of the fire.

Further north, Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E), SCE’s counterpart in Northern and Central California, cut power to almost one million people on Sunday, in response to what forecasters predicted would be the worst fire weather this season: a combination of hurricane-strength seasonal desert winds, known as the Diablo and Santa Ana winds, and extremely dry conditions, due to a very dry spring season and a summer with no rain.

“It’s definitely the strongest wind event of this fire season and probably the lowest humidity as well,” said

Duane Dykema, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Monterey. “So overall, these are the most dangerous and critical conditions we’ve seen this fire season.” Power was expected to be restored within 12 hours after the winds subside between Monday and Tuesday morning, PG&E said.

PG&E equipment failures ignited very damaging wildfires in 2018, including the Camp fire, destroying the town of Paradise. The company pled guilty to 84 counts of manslaughter and also agreed to pay billions of dollars to settle damage claims for fires sparked by its equipment between 2015 and 2018.

The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in December 2019 that the \$13.5 billion settlement between PG&E and victims of the 2018 fires represented a fraction of the damages actually caused by the company’s outdated and poorly maintained equipment and power lines.

At one point, seeking to assuage public anger, Democratic California Governor Newsom denounced PG&E for corporate negligence and mismanagement, and even initiated a task force to create a potential plan for a state takeover of the utility.

Newsom, however, had received over \$200,000 in contributions from PG&E in his 2018 gubernatorial campaign. Far from taking over the company, Assembly Bill 1054, sponsored by Newsom, “created a \$21 billion bailout for utility companies to pay for damages incurred by wildfires sparked by their equipment and has motivated the removal of legal liability standards for electrical utilities. Under the bill, investor-owned utilities are only required to contribute \$5 billion over five years into the fund while additional support will come from taxpayer funding and through increased utility bill rates,” the report noted

Questions have been repeatedly raised about the failure of the California Public Utility Commission (CPUC) to regulate PG&E and the utilities under its supervision. In

2014, the CPUC was accused of spending millions of dollars to thwart a probe into its backdoor communications with PG&E and SCE.

In 2017, KQED, a public TV network, released emails that revealed the sweetheart relationship between the CPUC and PG&E.

Nothing seems to have changed for PG&E, which is now being investigated for possibly causing last month's Zogg Fire in Northern California's Shasta County. Four people died in that fire and over 56,000 acres of land were destroyed.

Adding to the factor of human-induced climate change, which contributes to the increasing severity of the California wildfires, winds, dry terrain, and high temperatures, are profit-making corporations such as PG&E and SCE, that with the assistance of Democratic Party politicians and the CPUC officials, are making this a record wildfire season.

The solution cannot be left up to government agencies or state politicians, Democrats or Republicans.

Last December, the WSWS analysis ended with these words, which are still true, almost one year later:

What is required in addition to rebuilding the livelihoods of the tens of thousands of wildfire victims is the complete overhaul of electrical transmission equipment, including the installation of underground transmission lines as well as brush clearing and other fire-prevention programs. Likewise, this must coincide with a global reduction of greenhouse gasses and emissions, which contribute to climate change that is making droughts and wildfires more severe and frequent.

These policies can only be implemented through a revolutionary reorganization of society from one in which everything, including the right to electricity and life on a habitable planet, is subordinated to the profit interest of a tiny capitalist elite to one in which the world's resources are utilized to meet the needs of all of humanity.



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