

Hundreds evacuated in the face of fast-moving Southern California wildfire

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On Wednesday evening, a house fire quickly ignited the forested area of Silverado Canyon in Southern California's Orange County, south of Los Angeles. At the time of this writing, families are being evacuated, many fleeing their homes with little or no notice, while at least 7,200 acres have already caught on fire. Two firefighters were injured in the initial response.

This most recent conflagration, in a fire season of record wildfires, is now known as the Bond Fire. Evacuation notices affect 25,000 residents and have been extended to Silverado Canyon, Williams Canyon, Modjeska Canyon, Black Star and Baker Canyons and parts of Portola Hills and Foothill Ranch. By early morning Thursday, hundreds of households had been evacuated in Silverado and communities near the city of Lake Forest.

Though residential density in Silverado Canyon is rather low, the area is situated near populated Orange County suburbs, including Irvine, home to a University of California campus.

Initial containment measures did not stop new fires from starting, as hot embers were transported by strong wind gusts of 35 to 70 miles per hour (56 to 113 kph) over extremely dry vegetation. The Bond Fire remained zero percent under control as of Thursday evening.

Utilities in Orange County, population 3.2 million, had begun cutting power Wednesday to customers as a precaution to prevent gusts from knocking down live power lines, which in recent past have ignited wildfires. More electricity cuts are planned for Orange and Los Angeles Counties. This is the reason why an electric fire has been ruled out as a cause for this latest wildfire.

By imposing blackouts and cutting essential electricity to thousands of households, the utility monopolies, with outdated and poorly maintained equipment that has been the cause of many fires across

the state, seek to avoid any liability while putting the lives of their customers at risk.

Southern California cut power to almost 35,000 customers and may de-energize lines serving a total of about 260,000 customers in seven counties throughout the windy period, which could last into Saturday. For its part, San Diego Gas and Electric, which had cut power to about 24,000 customers on Wednesday, is considering blackouts to another 23,000 customers.

This year, an extended fire season has resulted in scores of major fires across California and the West Coast more broadly. Warmer spring and summer temperatures, less snowpack and earlier spring snowmelt brought on by manmade climate change have intensified dry seasons, stressing brush and forests and making them more vulnerable to very strong fires. The fire season is estimated to have increased by 75 days across the Sierra Mountains.

Residents expressed their surprise for the fact that such a fire could break out only 3 weeks before Christmas. "It's shocking that fire season is still going on into December. It seems like every time there's winds, a fire breaks out," said Patrick Day, a Lake Forest resident in an interview for the *Los Angeles Times*.

This year alone, California has suffered record losses; before the Bond Fire, at least 9,279 wildfires had burned over 6,800 sq. miles (17,640 sq. km), more than the combined area of the states of Connecticut and Rhode Island. Some 33 people have died, and 10,500 homes and other structures were damaged or destroyed, for an estimated cost of \$2 billion.

Orange County fire authorities indicated that crews were scrambling to stay ahead of the flames.

"When crews arrived, it was a fully engulfed house and the winds were extremely strong and they pushed

flames into the vegetation,” said Colleen Windsor, a spokeswoman for the Orange County Fire Authority.

The Bond Fire is burning near the area of October’s Silverado Fire, which forced tens of thousands to evacuate.

That this fire season has caught California with insufficient resources with which to combat the disastrous storm of wildfires is an indictment of the capitalist profit system.

The Bond Fire is the latest direct consequence of decades of policies favoring big business and the utility monopolies and allowing them to turn their backs on much-needed upgrades and equipment maintenance, anchored on the concept that the self-interested banks and corporations would efficiently balance safety and profits, coupled with the privatization of key capabilities and the diminished financial resources.

Such policies have, moreover, produced general neglect in forest and brush management, leaving the state without the resources, skills and capabilities needed to deal with the current fire disaster.

As with the coronavirus pandemic, environmental policy, forest management, firefighting and the provision of basic utility services such as electricity cannot be left in the hands of big business and its political agents in the Democratic and Republican parties. What is required is the enactment of socialist policies, to empower workers to take control over all aspects of socioeconomic life—public utilities, large corporations and banks—to manage and provide the resources with which to satisfy human needs, including preventing and fighting wildfires.



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