

Wildfires rage in Turkey and across the Mediterranean region

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Forest fires have spread to several Mediterranean countries since July and continue to burn fiercely. Massive forest areas are burned out, many people have died in the firefighting, countless animals have perished, thousands of people have lost their homes, and the smoke of the fire has spread over wide areas. Moreover, scientists warn that wildfire smoke may greatly increase susceptibility to SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

Internationally, the indifference and bankruptcy of governments in the face of the disaster contrasts strikingly with the solidarity and self-sacrifice of working people and youth fighting the wildfires.

At the end of July, wildfires raged through the Italian island of Sardinia, where it is the worst disaster in decades. Over 50,000 acres (20,000 hectares) around the historic Montiferru area have burned. Smaller fires are blazing in Spain and France. In addition to fires in Albania, Macedonia and Morocco, blazes erupted in Lebanon spread to its neighbor, Syria, and Cyprus has also fought against fires that killed at least four.

In Turkey, which has witnessed the most severe forest fires, many areas in the Mediterranean and Aegean regions of the country have faced fires for about ten days. As of Wednesday, Forestry Minister Bekir Pakdemirli announced that 183 forest fires erupted in Turkey from July 28 to August 4, 2021. While 167 fires in 33 provinces have been taken under control, 16 fires are still raging in 16 provinces of Turkey. Reportedly, an area of at least 40,000 hectares have burned, and eight people have lost their lives.

The fires, which could not be brought under control due to high air temperature, strong winds and insufficient measures of the government, reached the thermal power plant in Milas district of Mu?la on Wednesday evening, creating a great danger.

Experts had been warning for days that the fire could

reach Kemerköy Thermal Power Plant in Milas. A ditch was started to be dug around the power plant, which was stated to contain nearly 40,000 tons of coal, but the flames reached the power plant. Mu?la Metropolitan Mayor Osman Gürün has announced that the hydrogen tanks in the plant have been degassed.

The Defense Ministry announced that “As the forest fire in Mu?la’s Milas district came closer to the thermal power plant, our citizens who gathered in the dock are being evacuated to safe places by the landing ships of our Naval Forces.” It was announced that the fire, which continued for ten hours at the power plant, was brought under control yesterday morning.

Greece is another epicenter of the wildfires in the Mediterranean. Since the forest fire disaster in 2018 while the pseudo-left Syriza (“Coalition of the Radical Left”) party was in power, there have been more than 150 fires across the country. Because of wildfire smoke, scientists recommend the use of masks in the capital, Athens.

More than a dozen villages have been evacuated on the island of Evia near Athens since Tuesday, Reuters reported: “Fires that had threatened the northern outskirts of Athens on Tuesday were under control.”

According to the Greek daily Kathimerini, “The Defense Ministry on Thursday is expected to announce plans to deploy the armed forces in the ongoing battle against several major wildfires tearing through forestland and villages in Evia, the Peloponnese and other parts of the country.” It also reported that “12,500 hectares of land was scorched and a hundred houses were either destroyed or suffered lighter damage.”

Moreover, Greek Deputy Civil Protection Minister Nikos Hardalias warned that “conditions over the next few days and weeks will be even more difficult than they are today.”

After years of EU austerity, Greece is unprepared for these fires, though they were widely expected. Many

people accused the right-wing New Democracy (ND) government of not taking action against the fires.

On social media videos, people who lost their houses during the fire said that there were no fire trucks to put out the fire. One user tweeted: “Athens is covered by smoke. Evia and Mani are burning. Inferno. No money for health, civil protection or education. Just for more cops and for the mainstream media.”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, floods and wildfires around the world are the “direct product of the climate crisis produced by the capitalist profit system” and “the deadly effects of climate change are the product of decades of under-funding and cuts to infrastructure” by the capitalist governments, whose policies also led to disaster during the COVID-19 pandemic.

After the government opened up the economy as part of a global “herd immunity” policy by ruling elites under conditions of the more contagious and more deadly Delta variant spread, Greece has seen a surge of the pandemic. Active cases are closing on the peak point reached last April, more than 30,000.

The Turkish government’s inadequate handling of wildfires has also provoked widespread popular anger. On social media, many people rightly compared it with its response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a result of the “herd immunity” strategy of the government, nearly 6 million people infected and over 51,000 died so far due to COVID-19. A study on the “excess deaths” shows that real death toll is well over 150,000. After President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s government fully removed all restrictions since early July under conditions of Delta variant spread, Turkey has recently begun to see more than 25,000 daily cases.

After decades of under-funding and cuts, Turkey, one of the epicenters of wildfires in Europe, does not have any usable firefighting aircraft. In response to the widespread criticism over the lack of such planes at the end of July, Erdoğan declared that “the Turkish Aeronautical Association does not have any planes to fly here [fire area] comfortably.” He added, “As of today, the number of planes has increased to five or six with the planes from Russia and Ukraine.”

The president’s Communications Directory recently announced that they deploy 16 planes, nine drones, 52 helicopters and more than 1,000 vehicles, including water trucks and fire engines, as well as over 5,000 personnel. Air and land support came from Spain, Croatia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Georgia, as well as from Russia and Ukraine.

A recent report by the General Forestry Directorate shows that the government has made no preparations against forest fires. In its goals for 2021, it planned to spend 55 million Turkish liras for “Forest Protection and Fire Fighting Projects,” but only spent 28,000 liras. While it announced plans to buy 26 helicopters against fires, it did not buy them.

On Saturday, Erdoğan’s visit with a huge escort convoy to Marmaris district of the city of Muğla on the Mediterranean coast, which was largely hit by fires, also caused massive anger on social media. Recalling former US President Donald Trump, who tossed paper towels at hurricane victims in Puerto Rico, Erdoğan threw packets of black tea to the people from his bus, reflecting the ruling elites’ distance and contempt for working people suffering.

In contrast, in addition to a 1,000-room presidential palace in Ankara, the state is also building a 300-room summer palace in Marmaris for president.

The government, which initially refused to seek international aid, causing the fires to spread, is reacting fiercely to calls for help on social media, seeking to suppress social anger with police state measures. The Ankara Chief Public Prosecutor’s Office has launched an investigation into related messages, claiming that “it has been detected that some people and groups, in an organized manner via real or bot accounts, tried to create worry, fear and panic in society and degrade the state and government of the Republic of Turkey.”

Whatever the capacities of the individual nation states, the response to the fires cannot be coordinated on a nation by nation level or solved on a national basis. In the recent period, from the Americas to Europe or from Asia to Australia, the national capitalist governments have made clear that they are organically incapable and hostile to organize an international response not only towards fires and other ecological catastrophes, but also to the COVID-19 pandemic. The only social force capable of imposing and organizing a globally-coordinated response to these disasters is the international working class, fighting on the basis of a socialist program.



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