

“Why are no firefighting planes coming?”

Wildfires rage across Greece as austerity hobbles firefighting effort

Katerina Selin
8 August 2021

“Hell,” a “nightmare,” and a catastrophe of biblical proportions: these are just some of the expressions from residents and journalists as they struggle to describe what is happening before their eyes in Southern Europe. The forest fires across the Mediterranean region have continued to rage over recent days, especially in Greece, where the situation is totally out of control.

While the solidarity and spirit of sacrifice are tremendous, with residents and firefighters waging a bitter struggle day and night against the fires, rage is mounting over the lack of action by the right-wing New Democracy (ND) government, which is responsible for this crime against humanity and the environment. On social media, more and more people are calling for the resignation of the government.

A dangerous heat wave with temperatures of over 40 degrees Celsius and numerous fires have swept the country. The fires in Attica north of Athens have been temporarily suppressed, but they left behind skeletal shells of burned-out houses, charred trees and dystopian landscapes covered in ashes. At least 300 houses and 1,300 electricity poles have burned. A 38-year-old volunteer firefighter was killed by a power pole.

Firefighters are currently battling a blaze on the southern Peloponnese peninsula, including the regions around Olympia and Mani, where 56 houses burnt down. Two fires broke out on the island of Zakynthos in the Ionian Sea on Sunday.

But the forest fires are worst on Greece’s second-largest island, Euboea (Evia), with 220,000 inhabitants. The northern parts of Euboea, an idyllic region with pine forests, mountainous villages and small beaches and bays, have been transformed into an inferno. One week ago, a fire erupted in the village of Limni before rapidly spreading across the north of the island. “If no help is sent, we will be burned alive. The fire is coming on two fronts, and there is no way out, only the sea. We are thousands of people. Where are we supposed to go?” a terrified resident said on Saturday to Open TV. More than 2,000 residents of the northern region have been evacuated. Many people had to flee from their villages to the town of Istiaia, where around 10,000 people are holding out and can only be evacuated by sea.

The fire reached the village of Pefki and nearby villages on Sunday evening. Flames shot 100 meters into the air, consumed the forest and attacked the houses. Since the villages are surrounded by the fire, residents fled to the beach. Under a dusty red cloud, 400 residents found refuge on a ferry. The traumatised people were even forced to pay for tickets on some of the first evacuation trips. Only after outrage on social media did the government order the shipping companies to operate for free.

Desperate residents directed angry appeals and despairing pleas for help to the government. Litsa Efstathia, a resident from Pefki, told Open TV that there were no preparations, clear orders or support from the air against the fires. “We have not seen a single plane. Today is the fifth day. Nothing. Are there no planes to extinguish the fires? All of northern Euboea will burn down. Residents are trying to save themselves and fight. Everyone here is beside themselves with anger. We appeal, no we demand that aircraft come.”

Since Greece has a lack of operational personnel and firefighting planes due to decades of austerity measures, the firefighting service has been totally overwhelmed by fires breaking out all over the country. A large percentage of the force was deployed on Thursday and Friday to combat the fire approaching the capital Athens, with the result that few aircraft were deployed to Euboea, allowing the fires to spread unhindered.

Residents everywhere have sought to help themselves and protect their villages from the flames by all available means. They have tackled smoldering sections of forest with buckets of water and transformed their cars and small trucks into auxiliary fire engines to help extinguish the blazes.

The mayor from Istiaia, who initially downplayed the fires, was also outraged. He warned Open TV on Sunday, “Today we expect total destruction by fire here. We are alone. The fire brigade only gives us ridiculous evacuation orders. The villages are burning or are only being saved by the residents’ self-sacrifice. Aircraft must now be deployed to stop our region from burning. It is a disgrace to the country what is happening here. We have not extinguished a single front.”

While other countries like France, Ukraine, Cyprus, Croatia, Sweden and Israel have already sent help for the Greek emergency services, Germany only responded after a week. According to the Interior Ministry, units from the THW aid organisation and fire brigades from North Rhine-Westphalia and Hesse will be sent to Greece.

The fact that the German government has watched without taking action while Greece is ablaze is shocking but not surprising. It was the German government that has imposed with ruthless brutality the European Union's austerity measures on Greece's working class over the past ten years.

Responsibility for the systematic neglect of the catastrophe prevention system and infrastructure, together with the bleeding dry of public sector budgets, lies with the Greek and German ruling class. For them, the concern about saving human lives and protecting the environment is merely a bothersome expense that cuts across their profit-making interest.

These policies are supported by all parties, including the ND, social democratic PASOK and pseudo-left Syriza, leading to a series of avoidable wildfire disasters. In 2007, flames raged in the Peloponnese, Attica and Euboea. The inferno in the resort town of Mati under the Syriza government of Alexis Tsipras in 2018 claimed over 100 lives.

The government's priorities are underlined by the 2021 budget. The defence budget is increasing by one-third from last year to a total of €5.5 billion. The entire rearmament plan over the coming years is comprised of €11.5 billion. In addition, the government pumped another €30 million into the police to control the universities. Large sums of money flowed to pro-government media outlets, which are controlled by Greek oligarchs.

By contrast, savings are being made in health care and wildfire protection. Of the €17.7 million for fire protection requested by forest fire centers this year, the government approved just €1.7 million. Fire departments are hopelessly under-resourced, even though the government claims that the number of personnel has risen by 15.6 percent since 2018. In a country like Greece, which struggles with wildfires every year, this is a drop in the bucket.

Disaster protection infrastructure is also totally inadequate. Expenditure rose in 2021 from €400 million in 2018 to €616 million, the government boasted. But it remains silent on the fact that disaster protection is also responsible for conducting the coronavirus measures and contact tracing. Alongside the heat wave and catastrophic fires, the spread of COVID-19 is accelerating with over 3,000 cases per day.

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis has sought to divert attention away from the political record of his government by referring to the higher power of climate change, which created the exceptional emergency situation. But the reality is that it is the capitalist nature of their policies, like the ruling class around the world, that have both produced the environmental crisis to begin with and created the extent and misery of the

fires.

The forest fire crisis is not restricted to Greece, but is striking new areas. In Italy, fires are spreading in Sicily, Apulia and Calabria. In the Balkans, Bulgaria, Albania and Kosovo are also affected.

In Turkey, forest fires now partly brought under control raged for more than 10 days. In the area around Muğla, up to 60,000 hectares was burned as of August 6. Nearly 36,000 people had to be evacuated. On Friday, residents in Milas, Muğla, protested against the forestry minister Bekir Pakdemirli. The police detained a woman who shouted, "Where were the state's helicopters? People's properties are burned, shame on the government! The government should resign!"

Another hot spot is Russia. A state of emergency has been declared in many areas. Sakha, in the country's northeast, has been hit especially badly. Observers describe the fires as the worst they've ever seen. According to the authorities, a total of more than 250 fires are blazing over an area of more than three million hectares. Several villages have been evacuated. In the city of Sarov in Nizhny-Novgorod Oblast, an even larger catastrophe looms. There, the flames are threatening the national nuclear weapons research center.

The wildfire disaster is a direct consequence of climate change produced by the capitalist profit system, which threatens the future and lives of millions of people.

The International Panel on Climate Change will release today the initial stages of a report warning that the current wildfires and heat waves are only just the beginning. The Mediterranean region, with 500 million inhabitants, is seen as a hot spot for climate change. The IPCC projects here a more rapid increase in average temperatures than in any other region, according to AFP.

By 2050, a further 93 million people could be affected by heat waves, with approximately 20,000 heat-related deaths each year. Global warming will lead to ever more extreme weather events: droughts and heat waves like now in the Mediterranean on the one hand, and storms and floods on the other, as was recently seen in Germany, Belgium and China.



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