

After wildfires and drought ravage western Canada, parties offer nothing but platitudes on climate change in federal election campaign

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Western Canada has faced an onslaught of brutal weather events that left hundreds of people dead and saw thousands more evacuated and displaced during the summer of 2021. This is far from the first summer in which climate change-driven events have made their mark in the region, with the West Coast ravaged on a yearly basis by wildfires that have steadily increased in size and intensity over recent decades. However, this year's destruction occurred on an unprecedented scale.

As the summer draws to a close, the population of the western provinces is still grappling with the impact of the numerous heatwaves, wildfires, floods and droughts that have deeply affected communities large and small from British Columbia to Manitoba.

Heatwaves

At the end of June and beginning of July, the heatwave that scorched BC and Alberta along with the Pacific Northwest of the United States saw all-time temperature highs shattered day after day. British Columbia, which is home to 25 percent of the world's temperate rainforests and cooled by its proximity to the Pacific Ocean, saw temperatures surpass any ever recorded in Las Vegas, Nevada, located some 1,500 miles to the south in the Mojave Desert.

The region is normally temperate and therefore residents' homes are often unequipped with air conditioning units. So unusually severe was the heat that the average nighttime temperature was hotter than the normal daytime high for the same region on a typical summer day.

The township of Lytton, BC broke the record for the hottest temperature ever recorded in Canada for three days in a row, from June 27 through to June 29. Within 24 hours of recording the scalding record-high of 49.6 degrees Celsius (121.28 degrees Fahrenheit), Lytton was caught in the path of a fast-spreading wildfire and burned to the ground. Two people perished in the fire.

Climate scientists have explained that the "heat dome" that occurred was primarily triggered by a significant change in ocean temperatures from west to east in the tropical Pacific Ocean during the previous winter. The *World Socialist Web Site* reported that scientists, in a collaborative investigation following the event, found that it would have been "at least 150 times rarer without human-induced climate change."

The impact of the heat dome was devastating. The week of horror saw hundreds die, with coroners forced to leave corpses of the recently deceased where they had been found in order to rush to the next scene.

The emergency response system was overwhelmed with heat-related illnesses and fatalities. The BC coroner's office stated that the sudden death incidence was triple the usual rate across the six-day period. A total of 815 sudden deaths occurred during the heat dome in British Columbia alone, and 570 of those (70 percent) have since officially been deemed "heat-related." The office of Alberta's Chief Medical Examiner has also reported that during the heat dome there was a 55 percent increase in the usual sudden death incidence in the province, with 66 deaths deemed heat related.

Underlining the ruling elite's callous indifference towards this shocking loss of life, BC Premier John Horgan of the New Democratic Party (NDP) stated during a press conference that "fatalities are a part of life." Horgan added that the public was "acutely aware" of the imminent period of extreme heat and remarked that "it was apparent to anyone who walked outdoors that we were in an unprecedented heatwave and again, there's a level of personal responsibility." Horgan's casual dismissal of any responsibility for hundreds of deaths is of a piece with his government's criminal handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has included keeping workplaces and schools open and covering up infections in school buildings.

The ecological toll was also devastating, with over a billion seashore animals cooking to death on the beaches of British Columbia. Similar discoveries were made in the Strait of Georgia and Washington state.

BC's glaciers were also impacted by the heat, and the BC River Forecast Centre called the amount of snowmelt at the higher elevations "astounding." Flooding occurred as a result, causing major rivers to burst their banks. Residents in some areas were advised to move to higher ground.

Wildfires

British Columbia's forests were left in tinder-box dry conditions. The night that the heat dome "broke," cool winds swept through the Western Provinces and provided some relief from the days of hellishly hot conditions. This environment became decidedly catastrophic that same evening, however, as thousands of overnight lightning strikes sparked fires in the forests and the winds spread the flames rapidly.

The forest fire that burned down Lytton was one of many that scorched the province's interior. Over 250 wildfires burned in the months of July and August, and thousands of homes were evacuated—many of which were

located on rural First Nations reservations—as crews battled the massive burns. Thirty of the wildfires were declared “potentially life-threatening.” Firefighting teams from Alberta, Quebec, Mexico, Australia and the Canadian Armed Forces were brought in to aid the struggle in the province.

The immense amount of thick smoke in the region saw the province’s interior communities choked by air that surpassed the worst possible grading on the air quality health index. In downtown Kelowna, speckles of ash could be seen covering parked vehicles. The smoke was so severe that it spread to the eastern side of the continent, leaving New York and New Jersey shrouded in a smoky haze. New York City’s air quality consequently reached its worst standard in fifteen years.

As of September 9, 209 wildfires still raged across BC. Since April, 868,604 hectares of land have been burned.

Droughts

The months of extreme heat and little moisture have baked the Prairie provinces and dried out the land, resulting in droughts across Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba that have matured crops faster than usual and brought on an early harvest.

Fruit has baked on the vine during the summer’s unusually harsh heatwaves. Statistics Canada currently projects this fall’s wheat harvest in Western Canada will be 35 percent below last year’s levels. Fields are cracked and rivers have run dry, and farmers have been forced to sell off their cattle.

The fields that cows usually graze on into September cannot sustain the animals after the blistering summer, and farmers must now either buy expensive feed or sell off their livestock. Online marketplaces are brimming with postings of cows for sale; calves are typically sold off first, and now adults are being sold for the lowest prices the market has seen in over ten years. In August, ranchers’ water supplies began to dry up too, and matters are worsened by a shortage of hay. Some predict that up to 20 percent of the Canadian cattle herd may be liquidated as the cows will ultimately have to be culled if they cannot be fed and watered.

The effect of these conditions on the food supply chain has already begun to take root over the past two months. Grocery price hikes are only expected to increase as fall begins.

“It’s likely the highest jump in food prices in recent history, in dollars (unadjusted for inflation). And I think the worst is yet to come,” Sylvain Charlebois, director of the Agri-Food Analytics Lab at Dalhousie University, recently told *Global News*. Charlebois said he anticipates a yearly overall food price increase of five percent, which would mean that the average Canadian family could spend roughly \$700 more on groceries in 2021 than in 2020.

Canadian capitalism cannot combat climate change

Faced with this calamitous situation, none of the major party leaders in the current federal election campaign has been able to articulate a coherent strategy to deal with climate change. The failure of any of the major parties to present a viable plan is bound up with the fact that they all subordinate their environmental policies to the prerogative of big business and the financial oligarchy to accumulate vast profits.

The Trudeau Liberal government, supported by its trade union allies, is concerned above all with making corporate Canada a world leader in

emerging clean technologies, which will prove tremendously lucrative for executives and shareholders in the years ahead. While this brand of “green capitalism” is dressed up as being incredibly “progressive,” it rests on the gutting of business regulations, tax exemptions, and the shredding of workers’ rights. It is also premised on a cut-throat struggle between the major imperialist powers and their rival nationalist interests, with Trudeau and US president Joe Biden attempting to use the climate change issue as yet another means to ratchet up economic and military pressure on China.

The New Democrats, who spent the past two years propping up Trudeau’s minority Liberal government, have attacked the Prime Minister during the campaign for his government’s failure to reach carbon emissions reduction targets. “Justin Trudeau has failed all of us. You had six years and you’ve got the worst track record in the G7,” NDP leader Jagmeet Singh said during the English-language leaders’ debate on September 9. “Let’s talk about the cost—the cost of inaction is the entire town of Lytton being wiped out by a climate forest fire.”

But the NDP would do little different, merely proposing some tweaks to tighten loopholes in Canada’s carbon tax system. More fundamentally, the party has played the decisive role in keeping Trudeau in power because it shares the Liberals’ commitment to protect the profit interests of corporate Canada and defend Canadian imperialist economic ambitions around the world, which are incompatible with any serious effort to address climate change.

Climate change is a global problem requiring a worldwide plan based on the latest scientific knowledge to resolve it. The capitalist profit system, with its competing national states and ruling elites who subordinate everything, including the very survival of humanity, to the profit motive, is wholly incapable of bringing this about. Anyone unconvinced about this should consider the shambolic response to the COVID-19 pandemic carried out by the ruling class in every major imperialist country. Openly flouting the recommendations of scientists and medical experts who have proven that a comprehensive eradication strategy could eliminate COVID-19 in a matter of weeks, the bourgeoisie in North America and Europe has allowed the virus to run rampant, killing millions around the globe, because the public health measures necessary to stop it would cut across the profits of the major corporations.

The only social force capable of instituting the globally coordinated scientific planning required to combat climate change and the pandemic is the international working class. To do this, it must be mobilized in struggle against the capitalist profit system’s policies that are causing environmental devastation, and mass infection and death. Workers must turn to a socialist and internationalist program to wage such a struggle.



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