California wildfire season begins early with first months of 2022 the state's driest on record

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Prematurely hot weather and lack of rainfall has started wildfire season early in California. The Coastal Fire in the Orange County area of Southern California gained nationwide coverage last week as dozens of multi-million dollar mansions in the city of Laguna Niguel were burned to the ground by the fast-moving blaze.

The Coastal Fire destroyed 20 homes and damaged nearly a dozen others with mandatory evacuation orders still remaining in effect. An investigation is currently underway to determine the cause of the fire although officials from the Southern California Edison utility company claim that an unspecified electrical "circuit activity" at a nearby water treatment plant was likely responsible.

As of Monday morning, the fire was at 60 percent containment with crews working to battle the remainder of the blaze before more homes were threatened.

By all accounts, the fire started and spread quickly under what were relatively moderate conditions. Humidity was high, around 70 percent, while temperatures only reached approximately 78 degrees Fahrenheit. Nonetheless, a confluence of unfavorable factors led to the sparking of the blaze.

It is believed that vegetation in the adjoining canyon area had been devastated by drought conditions extending back decades. That, along with high winds and steep terrain caused the fire to rapidly spread.

Laguna Niguel is a relatively affluent area of southeastern Orange County with median household income nearly double the national average. Moreover, the median home price as of April 2022 was $1.3 million. At the Coronado Pointe gated community, where most of the homes were damaged or destroyed, houses were valued at $3 million or more, with one of the mansions valued at $10 million.

A mass mobilization was carried out to battle the fire including 550 firefighters and multiple air drops of water and fire retardant chemicals on homes and the surrounding Aliso Canyon area. There were no deaths as a result of the fires although two firefighters were injured, both of whom were released from hospitalization soon afterwards.

"What we experienced was a fire, wind-driven, down a relatively level flat terrain, until it hit the side of that slope, and fire is always going to run uphill faster, wind or no wind. But when you have that strong a wind blowing that fire uphill. And if you're familiar with that area, it is extremely steep, extremely thick vegetation that has not burned in probably decades," according to Orange County Fire Authority Chief Brian Fennessy.

The latest fire is the fourth in the Orange County area so far this year. The Emerald Fire in Laguna Beach broke out in February while the Jim Fire broke out in the Cleveland National Forest in March, and another fire broke out in the San Juan Capistrano area in the same month.

"We don't have a fire season," said TJ McGovern, Orange County Fire Authority assistant chief of operations. "It's year-round now, and these last four fires that we've had just proved it to all of us."

In fact, the state of California experienced its second worst fire season on record in 2021 with more than 8,619 wildfires burning through more than 2.6 million acres of land. The worst fire season on record was a year prior in 2020 with 9,600 fires burning more than 4.3 million acres of land.

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The protracted and devastating fire seasons are the result of rising temperatures and other consequences of man-made climate change for which US and world capitalism are responsible and have no solution. Moreover, the dilapidated status of infrastructure in the US, including in California, is also a highly significant factor in the massive increase in wildfire activity.

Fire prevention efforts in the state, including brush clearing and related maintenance, range from small to non-existent. Last September, California lawmakers approved a budget package providing $1 billion in wildfire prevention funding with $200 million for the next six years afterwards, a thoroughly inadequate amount in the third largest state in the country by area. The funding source of the annual $200 million will be the state's greenhouse gas cap-and-trade program, meaning that fire prevention efforts will be paid by industries that emit greenhouse gases leading to more fires.

California's Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom, who came into office in 2019 largely with the support of the Getty oil family, has done virtually nothing to buttress fire prevention efforts and has worked tirelessly to shield large utilities from responsibility for the fires and associated damages they cause. According to a 2019 investigation conducted by the *Washington Post*, Newsom and his wife also received more than $700,000 from the Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E) to fund his political campaigns and other projects.

During his first year in office, the governor signed a budget which cut fire prevention efforts by $150 million versus the prior year.

And despite multiple investigations finding PG&E responsible for starting some of the worst single wildfires in the state's history, the Dixie Fire of 2020 and the Camp Fire of 2018, the governor has done everything in his power to shield the company from responsibility. Investigators found that the utility's antiquated power infrastructure and transmission towers, some of which are more than a century old, are extremely vulnerable to high winds during peak fire seasons with downed power lines easily able to spark fires in dry vegetation or other flammable sources nearby.

The findings led Newsom to put on a show of railing against the utility's greed and mismanagement. "It's about corporate greed meeting climate change," Newsom said. "It's about decades of mismanagement. It's about focusing on shareholders and dividends over you and members of the public."

Newsom's real attitude to PG&E was underscored by his signing into a law a wildfire liability fund, which can be used by giant utilities to tap into to cover costs associated with fire damages they caused. The bill AB 1054 was signed into law in the summer of 2019 and offered $21 billion in funding. Half of the funding is to come through rate increases imposed on utility companies and does not make any provisions for the utilities to upgrade old power infrastructure and thus lessen the chances of wildfires.

In fact, the only measures taken by the utilities to mitigate the crisis have been the imposition of electrical blackouts during periods of elevated fire danger, leaving millions of customers in the lurch and in exchange for the elevated rates endured by the latter.

The fact that a fire could quickly devastate and overcome a wealthy neighborhood like that in Laguna Niguel is only an indication that it can easily happen anywhere else. In order to prevent this extraordinarily dire state of affairs the utility companies and fire-fighting agencies must be placed under the democratic control of the working class, ending the subordination of the basic safety needs of the population to private profit.

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