

Deaths mount, wildfires spread as heat wave shatters records across Europe

Our reporters
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The mounting death toll and devastation from wildfires and drought are exposing the indifference and inaction of state authorities across Europe to the catastrophic impact of global warming.

The heat wave is setting records across Europe. Pinhão saw the highest temperature ever recorded in Portugal, 47°C (116.6°F); France saw 64 cities set records, including Biscarrosse, 42.6°C; while London's Heathrow Airport recorded 40.2°C. Yesterday marked the first time a temperature over 40°C was ever recorded in Britain.

The confirmed death toll from the heat wave on the Iberian Peninsula alone is now already above 1,700. Portuguese General Health Authority Director Graça Freitas reported yesterday that there were 1,063 heat-related deaths between July 7 and July 18 in the country, adding: "We have to be more and more prepared for periods of high temperatures." The Carlos III Institute confirmed that Spain had seen 678 heat-related deaths between July 10 and July 17.

This toll could rise explosively in the coming days. Former UK Government Chief Scientist David King warned that the British excess death toll from the heat wave could reach 10,000. "We're a country with relatively high humidity," King said, adding, "High humidity, high temperatures, quite simply that's higher than the body temperature should be. If you are even in the shade outdoors at 40°C and 80 percent humidity, you won't live for very long."

Portugal and Western Europe broadly are particularly vulnerable to heat waves due to climate change. Lisbon University Professor Carlos Antunes noted: "With climate change, it is expected that this increase in mortality will intensify, and therefore we have to take measures at the public health level to minimize the impact."

As they pursue a policy of mass infection and death with COVID-19, Europe's governments are writing off any collective action to address global warming and the heat wave. After UK Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab cynically told Britons to "enjoy the heat" and be "resilient," the tragic death of Madrid street cleaner José Antonio González highlighted European governments' inaction and indifference to the plight of workers laboring in the heat.

At least 14 Madrid street cleaners have fallen victim to heatstroke, working in the sun in heavy polyester uniforms. González, aged 60, was transported to hospital after being found unconscious on the ground with a body temperature of over 41°C (106°F). He later died of a heart attack.

His son Miguel, 21, told the press: "I think working in 42°C heat, without shade and in those clothes ... it's immoral. It should not happen. We all know it can be avoided, but until something like this happens, they do not realize."

His father still worked extremely hard at age 60, Miguel said, because he was an Urbaser temp worker trying to get a permanent job with the city of Madrid. "He would come back exhausted. I know he realized this could happen to him, but he did it because he wanted to get a permanent contract. I'm convinced he kept cleaning that street until he passed out. He thought they would not renew his temp contract, and he wanted to give it his all to show that he was worthy. That, for me, is inhuman. That should make all of us think. These are not conditions in which one can live."

Miguel said that when he turned on his father's computer and looked at his Google search history, he found that his father had searched for "What do to in case of heatstroke."

After Madrid Mayor José Luis Martínez-Almeida

broke his silence on his father's death two days later, saying, "We were not aware that there were complaints about the uniforms," Miguel replied, "Well, that's not true. Everyone should admit to what they are responsible for. The city should do more, beyond providing excuses, and trying to blame the temp work agency. No one else should have to live through what we are living through."

Capitalist governments across Europe and internationally have ignored warnings of the catastrophic implications of climate change. Only a truly massive infusion of resources, coordinated on an international scale, can create the necessary infrastructure to cut greenhouse gas emissions; protect populations and food supplies from drought, wildfires and rising sea levels; halt the surge in temperatures; and save lives. However, what little capitalist governments have been able to agree upon is manifestly insufficient.

While the Paris Accords have set unacceptably low goals—a rise in average global temperatures of no more than 1.5°C to 2°C—the 1.2°C increase that has occurred is already boosting the frequency, intensity and duration of extreme heat waves.

A recent study in *Nature Communications* warned that due to air flow patterns and configurations of the jet stream over Eurasia, Europe will face particularly extreme heat waves. Europe is, the study found, "a heatwave hot-spot, exhibiting upward trends that are three-to-four times faster compared to the rest of the northern mid-latitudes." One of the authors of the study, Kai Kornhuber of Columbia University, said, "Breaking records is the new normal," adding that temperatures will keep rising as long as greenhouse gas emissions continue.

With major rivers like the Po and Serchio virtually running dry, municipalities across northern Italy are issuing or preparing to issue a ban on water use except for health care and food. With very limited rainfall this winter and glaciers in the Alps evaporating, University of Turin Professor Stefano Fenoglio explained, "The result is that the rivers did not receive any water input and, by the end of February, their state was very similar to that of a river in August. ... Drought is treated like an acute episode, but it's becoming a chronic one now."

Firefighters and water-tanker planes are fighting wildfires that are raging out of control across Southern Europe. They are hitting Crete, Corfu and the periphery

of Athens in Greece; areas around Milan, Trieste and Rome in Italy; the regions of Castilla y Leon and Galicia in Spain; the regions of Murça and Chaves in Portugal; and in Brittany and the Gironde region around Bordeaux in France.

Over 34,000 people have been evacuated from villages and towns across the Gironde, where fires have burned over 20,000 hectares of forest. "This fire is a monster. It spreads extremely fast due to the very hot, dry air. Its perimeter is over 42 kilometers, it is impossible to post forces on all sides of it. And because of erratic winds, it advances first on one side, then on another, so that firemen have to reposition themselves constantly," said Gironde Council President Jean-Luc Gleyze.

The impact of the fire yesterday afternoon was felt 500 km away in Paris, where smoke blackened the sky and gave off a burnt smell. The Paris police prefecture issued a public appeal to Parisians via social media: "You may detect a burnt smell. This almost certainly comes from the current wildfires in France. ... Do not burden emergency response call lines. Only call firemen if there is a confirmed fire."

The heat wave is expected to move north and east into parts of Belgium, the Netherlands, and southern and western Germany in the coming days.



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