Heat emergency threatens thousands of lives in California

Rafael Azul
9 September 2022

A “heat dome,” a strong high-pressure area, has been parked over western United States for more than a week, trapping warm and humid air from the Pacific and from Baja California, Mexico. The “dome” blocks cooler weather from moving in from northern regions (the ‘jet stream’) and impedes rainfall.

Beginning last weekend top daily temperatures across the state exceeded 104 degrees Fahrenheit (40 Celsius) and reached 116 degrees F (47 C). The heat wave, which is expected to dissipate this weekend, had a devastating impact on people without housing or access to air conditioning. A similar heat wave last year in Phoenix, Arizona resulted in at least 130 deaths, according to ABC News. An extreme heat dome over British Columbia in Canada last July resulted in 486 deaths over a span of five days.

Such a dome is the cause of the extreme heat wave that has been affecting the US state of California, aggravating an ongoing water shortage and endangering the electric power grid, putting the lives of tens of thousands of vulnerable people at risk. Under this dome, wildfires spread, become more intense, life threatening and harder to extinguish.

As of this writing, major fires are covering the entire region, from the Pacific Ocean to Nevada and from Southern Oregon to Northern Mexico. Presently, the wild-fires now raging include the Fairview Fire in Southern California’s Riverside County, which has consumed 20,000 acres. In southern Hill County the Eagle Creek Fire has now burned over 8,500 acres. Further north the Mosquito Fire is burning in very steep and inaccessible terrain in Placer County, west of Lake Tahoe. The Mill Fire destroyed an entire neighborhood in the city of Weed. Five casualties and two deaths have been reported so far.

As with the COVID-19 pandemic this disastrous heat wave exposes the class and income divide in one of the world’s wealthiest and most unequal regions. These nine days of heat are sure to result in the death of hundreds of poor and working people. In all these events—the pandemic, water shortage, and extreme heat—scientifically based remedies and preventive measures are available except for the fact that they conflict with the profit motives of Silicon Valley, private utilities, Hollywood and the financial sector.

The wealthy residents of upscale neighborhoods are insulated from the scorching heat, since they enjoy air-conditioned homes, generally in areas covered by trees, and with plenty of available water and parks nearby (by some estimates, these islands of prosperity use over three times as much water per person as the rest of the state’s residents).

Making things worse is the “urban heat island effect”—heat absorbed from the sun during the day by large cities with minimal tree cover and caused by engines and generators blocks night time cooling and increases air pollution. The heat island effect puts pressure on the health of children, pregnant women, elderly, people with underlying health conditions, and workers who labor under the sun, such as in construction or agriculture. Also affected are educators and students forced into super-heated classrooms across the state.

A roofer in Paramount, California described being forced to work on Labor Day under the hot sun: “If it’s 104 outside, it’s 140 on the roof; we wear wet hats and wet towels on our heads, but the heat drains all our energy.”

“The way things are in this area, everything is concrete and asphalt,” declared Eric Huerta of the East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice, speaking to Al Jazeera and describing conditions in the industrial city of Commerce, southwest of the crowded East Los Angeles neighborhood. “You get no reprieve from the heat, and it takes a real toll on your mental health.”

“California pushed to the limit by a relentless heat wave that broke the mold”, read the *Los Angeles Times* headline on September 7. The reality is that the mold is being broken across the planet. Heatwaves and extreme climate events driven by capitalist-induced climate change have now become normal for the world. The California nine-day record heatwave follows record extreme heat episodes across the northern hemisphere this year, including in Europe and China.

Since 2006, successive heat waves have hit California. The

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hottest decade up until now, 2010-2019 resulted in officially 390 heat-related deaths, a gross undercount since *Los Angeles Times* researchers estimated that the actual death toll was six times greater.

A *Los Angeles Times* article from October 2021 reported that "Extreme heat is the deadliest type of weather event killing more Americans than hurricanes, floods and wildfires. But doesn't usually appear on death certificates, making it hard to track and harder to get policymakers and the public to take seriously." As is increasingly the case with the current COVID-19 pandemic, most deaths caused by heat, or in which heat is a major contributor, go unreported across California and the United States.

Climate scientists in California had been predicting this development for nearly two decades, to no avail.

While severe weather shelters and cooling centers have been made available in public libraries, homes for the elderly and community centers across the state, their number and capacities are insufficient to meet the needs of the very poor, elderly and homeless. In most cases, they close for the evening. Getting to them is often a big problem for those in need.

In many schools across the state, learning has become very difficult due to overheated classrooms, gyms and playgrounds. At a protest rally in front of Lorena Elementary School in East Los Angeles on September 7, organized by Reclaim Our Schools LA, parents denounced the conditions at Lorena and many other schools, declaring that the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is totally unprepared to protect students. "If you think about what it feels like to be in a parking lot on a hot day, this is what kids all over Los Angeles experience every day," declared coalition member Aleigh Lewis, co-founder of Angelenos for Green Schools and a parent of two elementary school students, according to CBS News.

LAUSD doesn't expect to start installing the new AC units at the campus until early next year.

While the LAUSD policy is that all schools (but not all classrooms) should be air-conditioned, the systems are outdated and in need of a repair. A recent survey published in the LAist.com news page found that, "With excessive heat warnings in effect to begin September, Reseda Charter High's kitchen topped 95 degrees before 10 a.m. At Strathern Elementary, 115 degrees. Gompers Middle, 117 degrees. North Hollywood High, 121.7 degrees. LAUSD's facilities division is currently in "emergency mode." On Wednesday, September 7, this division was handling more than 2,900 calls for air conditioning service affecting around 1,900 classrooms."

The lack of cool air is a health threat, even a potential death sentence: many students and educators report moments of heat exhaustion during the day. When the heat is combined with high humidity and high levels of air pollution, younger students are affected by heat illness, and even death, particularly children who suffer from respiratory conditions, such as asthma.

Conditions in California factories are no different. Workers at garment sweatshops describe working under temperatures that approach 132 degrees F, with windows closed and minimal ventilation, and with little water provided by supervisors and managers.

Even Hollywood has not been spared. Saalika Khan, a production assistant, collapsed after working all day in Sylmar, California, preparing for a scene. According to a report published by the *Los Angeles Times*, Khan, 32, dropped some stage material, started gagging and her vision got blurry after working on hot asphalt all morning. The asphalt was so hot that she burned her hand falling on it. This was the second heat stroke incident on the set, after a truck driver required medical attention.

The California heat emergency requires science-driven measures that must include shutting down schools and factories that do not have adequate air conditioning and ventilation, identifying, tracking and assisting vulnerable individuals such as pregnant women, children and the elderly, providing enough air conditioned 24/hour cooling centers for workers, poor and homeless individuals, and ensuring adequate cooling in homes. In addition, everyone must be provided with clean water, sanitation and emergency care.

As with the COVID pandemic, such basic measures interfere with profit motives and can only be carried out with the working class in control of society.

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