

Interview with Kentucky-based wildland firefighter: “They would work us off the clock a lot... all unpaid”

Zac Thorton
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Ethan, a wildland firefighter, recently spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about his experiences on the job, as well as his thoughts on the intersection between corporate negligence on the part of the power utilities and climate change, which has led to more frequent extreme weather events, including wildfires.

Based in Kentucky, Ethan describes himself as a “forestry laborer, which encompasses a lot of different things.” Describing his journey to becoming a firefighter, he said, “I’ve worked outside most of my life, beginning in high school. The first job I had was as a farm hand.

“I’ve lived all over the place in Kentucky, but a lot of my upbringing was in a rural area. My mom was a teacher and my dad was a truck driver, and we grew pumpkins on the side. The first real job I had was as a landscaper. My entire career has been built on outdoor, ‘green collar’ work. Eventually I went to college for geography, and I was also a Marine, but I never saw combat.

“I started doing tree work after I got in some trouble. I ended up getting locked up in Kentucky and California. Most of my time was in Kentucky. I got a felony for reckless endangerment by getting loaded and trying to commit suicide-by-cop. It’s hard to talk about, but it’s part of my story.

“When you get a felony, in many ways it can be like a sentence of a life of hard labor, because typically those are the only jobs you can get. So once I got out, I started doing tree work as an arborist, tree climbing, logging, forestry and then eventually wildland firefighting.”

Asked what someone in his role typically makes, Ethan said, “Starting out we make \$13.50 an hour, but

because I’m certified on a chainsaw I’m making \$14 per hour. That’s typically what everyone makes. I think the government forest agencies pay a little better.

“We usually work a minimum of 12 hours a day, but sometimes 15-16 hours. We work 14 days straight, and if you work a full 14 days, that’s about \$2800 after taxes. It’s highly exploitative,” adding, “They would work us off the clock a lot, too, usually two to three hours a day, all unpaid.”

Describing some of the typical dangers associated with the profession, Ethan explains, “The last fire I was on, a ‘snag,’ basically a burnt tree trunk, fell on a guy and killed him. There was also someone who was killed by a ‘roller,’ a rolling rock. He wasn’t on my crew but it was at a fire I was at. Rollers and snags are the two biggest hazards, along with the terrain which is very steep.”

When asked if he is provided with adequate tools to do his job, he responded, “Not really. They give us two pairs of Nomex [flame resistant clothing], and that’s supposed to last us 14 days. A lot of times they’ll give us used Nomex with holes and rips, or they don’t fit properly. A lot of the hand tools are faulty. These companies have enough money to provide workers with the proper tools, but they don’t.

“They don’t issue boots either. You have to pay for your fire boots. They don’t reimburse for travel or lodging. The smoke and dust is really bad, but they don’t provide us with respirators. I’ve never seen anybody wearing one. Pretty much our only option is a wet bandana.”

Critically underfunded, state and federal fire agencies—such as CAL FIRE in California and the US Forest Service—often resort to prison labor in order to

keep costs down. Ethan explained, “It’s very common, especially in California. Every fire I was on, they usually had the inmates go in first, and they are there for a while before we moved in. I saw inmates in Oregon and California. Those are the two states I worked in [during the 2022 season].

“They basically use the inmates kind of in a way that’s similar to scabs. I’m not disparaging the inmates, I totally understand that if you have a chance to get out of a cell you’re going to take it. They pay them way less than minimum wage, probably a few dollars per hour.

“It’s hard for workers to organize when there’s such a massive pool of inmates that can be used to counter worker organizations. That’s why you never really see talks of strikes with wildland firefighters because there’s such a large prison population.”

While the private contractors do not make use of inmates, they usually take advantage of ex-convicts, who they recognize as having very few options, thus allowing them to be exploited with impunity.

“I started working on a tree crew in 2013 or 2014, and a lot of them are privately owned. They take advantage of ex-cons who are fresh out because they’re usually poor and on probation, so they’re limited with what they can do. My old boss on that tree crew loved to use ex-cons for that reason.

“They also don’t discriminate about which ex-cons they use. It’s not uncommon to have white supremacists or other ultra-right individuals, you know, very dangerous people, working side-by-side with you. On the tree crew I was with, I was the only one who wasn’t a part of them, and they put me in situations that were highly uncomfortable.”

When asked about the impact of climate change, Ethan stated, “When I moved to California in 2012, there were fires every year, and every year they got worse and worse. This past year was somewhat surprising because usually the fire season is from August through late October, but now it’s so unpredictable.

“I noticed they’re trying to hire more firefighters here on the East Coast. We almost had some here in Kentucky get out of control, but fortunately rain moved in and stopped them. With climate change wildfires are happening in places where they haven’t traditionally been. It’s really exacerbating everything.”

One of the defining features of many wildfires is the negligence of the power utilities. In 2018, negligence on the part of Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) led to one of the world’s deadliest wildfires, the Camp Fire, which killed 85 people and destroyed the town of Paradise, California.

Speaking to this, Ethan said, “PG&E’s negligence has certainly caused quite a few of the most disastrous wildfires in recent memory. I think [the utilities] should be seized and nationalized. I support public ownership of the power grid. These energy companies are definitely to blame for their negligence. They caused the Carr and Camp fires. Mismanagement, faulty equipment, vegetation too close to the power lines, these are issues that have led to disaster after disaster.”



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