

Over 115 million across US and Canada choked by smoke as massive wildfires burn out of control

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More than 115 million people across the eastern United States and Canada were under extreme air quality warnings Wednesday as choking smoke from massive wildfires burning in northern Quebec made its way as far south as Texas and Florida.

Extremely dry conditions and record-breaking heat driven by capitalist-induced climate change have resulted in the eruption of massive wildfires across Canada since early May. This has now developed into a public health crisis on an enormous scale.

The fires in Quebec have forced more than 11,400 people to flee their homes, with entire communities evacuated, including all 7,500 residents of Chibougamau. Over 460,000 hectares have already burned, breaking a more than 30-year-old fire season record, with many weeks yet to go.

The areas most impacted by the smoke include Canada's main population centers of Montreal in Quebec and Ottawa and Toronto in southern Ontario, upstate New York and New York City, as well as Philadelphia in eastern Pennsylvania and Pittsburgh in the west.

In New York City, the center of Wall Street and world finance capital, the Air Quality Index (AQI) soared well above 400, giving it the worst air quality of any major city in the world and the highest level since 1999, when the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) began recording measurements.

A hazardous air quality warning, the highest possible warning, was issued for Central New York and Eastern Pennsylvania from Syracuse to Allentown, with the AQI exceeding 400 Wednesday afternoon. All the major urban centers of Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey and Connecticut reported extreme AQIs above

150, which the federal government deems unhealthy.

Photos and videos showed the skyline of Manhattan obscured by heavy smoke and the sky tinted deep orange. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) issued a ground stop for flights into LaGuardia International Airport and slowed flights into Newark Liberty International Airport due to significantly reduced visibility. A Code Red Air Quality Action was issued by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection for the entire state Wednesday.

The inhalation of fine particulate smoke from wildfires can trigger asthma attacks and heart attacks and contributes to longer-term health issues, including lung cancer. It can also exacerbate conditions for those who recently suffered pneumonia or myocarditis, common conditions for those infected by COVID-19. Poor air quality is responsible for over six million fatalities per year globally, making it among the leading causes of death.

Health experts have made urgent warnings about avoiding any work and exercise outside, and that those who have to go out should, at a minimum, wear N95 respirators.

Despite the nature of the threat, however, no recommendations have come from the federal, state or provincial governments that people wear N95 masks when outside in the smoke-affected regions. In New York City and across the affected region, children were still sent to school, even as buildings filled up with smoke. And even though the immediate impact of toxic smoke on those who work in agriculture, landscaping, construction and in factories is well known, there were no stay-at-home orders issued.

The WSWS received reports from workers Tuesday night and Wednesday at the Mack Trucks plant in Macungie, Pennsylvania, just outside Allentown, that workers were passing out on the line and suffering from nausea and headaches due to the smoke, but production continued. Under conditions of terrible air quality and heat, no efforts were made to ventilate the plant or provide workers with high quality masks. The second shift was finally canceled Wednesday as conditions continued to deteriorate and workers called out sick.

In New York City, workers at a Trader Joe's walked out over unsafe conditions, declaring that the air was so bad that they had trouble breathing.

These horrors were repeated in countless workplaces across the affected regions of the US and Canada, with tens of millions forced to labor in unsafe and potentially deadly conditions.

As with every weather disaster or public health crisis, the capitalist ruling elites and their political representatives are totally indifferent to the suffering of the population. Their only concern is to keep production going and maintain profits in the face of mass suffering and death.

The apparatus of the trade unions, predictably, have done nothing to safeguard workers' lives. The union bureaucracy has kept workers on the job throughout the affected region, with production halted only when workers took action themselves.

The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed more than 20 million people globally and more than one million in the United States alone, has further inured the bourgeoisie to the misery they inflict on the working class. The dropping of all pretense to even mitigate the spread of COVID-19, allowing the virus to evolve into new and potentially more dangerous variants, signals the abandonment of the most basic principles of public health. Whether in response to the emergence of a new pandemic, or to what is in effect the mass poisoning of millions of people from smoke inhalation, the ruling class is determined that nothing will be done.

The widespread air pollution across Canada and the US is a graphic demonstration of the impacts of the deepening climate crisis, which scientists have repeatedly warned is fueling worse droughts, floods, wildfires, hurricanes and other devastating weather events. The consequences of unchecked global

warming are not in the future, they are already happening and being borne by workers around the world.

Last year saw the worst flooding in Pakistan's history, inundating one third of the country in water, killing more than 1,700 people and leaving over 2 million homeless. Australia witnessed one of its worst ever bushfire seasons in 2019-20, in which thousands of homes were destroyed and 34 people directly killed. An estimated 445 people died as the result of smoke inhalation. Meanwhile, extreme heat records have been repeatedly broken around the world, from China and India to the Arctic, which is one of the fastest warming regions of the planet. Last year was the fifth warmest on record globally and the last nine years were all in the top ten.

The poisoning of millions in the US has produced shock and concern among workers globally. In contrast to the indifference of the ruling elites, workers want to fight to defend their health and their lives. This requires the development of organizations, rank-and-file committees, comprised and controlled by the workers to enforce safe working conditions.

And it requires the development of a political movement directed at the ruling class and the capitalist system. While endless resources are devoted to war, social infrastructure is decimated and public health neglected.

Immediate global action is required to combat climate change and its most devastating effects, which have no national solution. Only an international movement of the working class, without regard for national boundaries or linguistic or ethnic divisions, and guided by the latest scientific knowledge, will be able to stop and ultimately reverse global warming. This will require the socialist transformation of society to sweep away the capitalist financial oligarchy who are destroying the planet for their own private interests and to place power in the hands of the international working class.



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