

“We should all be refusing to work in these hazardous conditions”

Over 120 million Americans under air quality alerts as wildfires continue to rage across Canada

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Over 120 million people, or more than a third of the US population, were under air quality alerts Wednesday in over a dozen states spanning from the Midwest to the East Coast as a result of an immense smoke plume from hundreds of wildfires raging across Canada.

Canada is presently experiencing the most destructive wildfire season in the country’s history, a direct manifestation of the deepening climate crisis. Occurring annually from May until October, Canada’s wildfire season typically peaks in August. But only two months into the wildfire season, nearly 8 million hectares of land—close to 20 million acres—have been burned, already an all-time record for a single year. Over the last 24 hours alone, this number has increased by over 100,000 hectares.

Since the beginning of 2023, the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre has recorded nearly 3,000 wildfires. At present, there are at least 477 fires burning in Canada, ranging from the country’s westernmost provinces to the furthest eastern regions. Of these fires, 237 are classified as “out of control,” 151 are officially considered “under control” and 89 fires are classified as “being held,” which means blazes are not under control, but stationary. On Wednesday, officials reported the highest number of current active fires in Quebec, 113 fires, and the second-highest in British Columbia, 94 active blazes.

Tens of thousands of people in Canada have been forced to flee their homes in the face of the raging fires, and millions more face “high risk” air quality from lingering smoke and smog.

Just three weeks after over 115 million people across the US East Coast and Canada were suddenly engulfed in toxic smog, this horrific environment has once again descended upon vast swaths of North America. Air quality index (AQI) scores have ranged from “unhealthy” to “very unhealthy” and even “hazardous.”

Chicago, Detroit, Minneapolis, Toronto and Washington D.C. were among the top 10 cities with the highest air pollution in the world on Wednesday, while other major cities reached the “very unhealthy” or “hazardous” thresholds, including St. Louis, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, Louisville and Indianapolis.

The inhalation of fine particulate smoke produced by wildfires is

known to have serious negative health effects, including triggering asthma attacks and heart attacks. Longer-term health problems also result from extended exposure and inhalation of this smoke, including lung cancer. Inhalation can also exacerbate conditions for those who recently suffered pneumonia or myocarditis, which are common conditions suffered by those infected with COVID-19. Poor air quality is a leading cause of death, killing at least 6 million people internationally every year.

Under these conditions, not even the most basic public health measures were taken to ensure the safety of the population. Despite the serious health risks, businesses and schools remained open, and industrial production continued uninterrupted throughout the vast geographic region inundated with smoke. At the federal, state and local levels, both Democratic and Republican politicians either ignored the danger or only issued perfunctory “health advisories,” which businesses flouted with impunity. At most, masking was only “encouraged,” with no explanation of the crucial importance of using a well-fitting N95 mask.

In his statement on Chicago’s air quality, newly-elected Democratic Mayor Brandon Johnson, backed by the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), perfectly illustrated the neglectful, indifferent response of capitalist politicians to the lives of workers:

The City of Chicago is carefully monitoring and taking precautions as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has categorized our Air Quality Index as “unhealthy” due to Canadian wildfire smoke present in the Chicago region. We recommend children, teens, seniors, people with heart or lung disease, and individuals who are pregnant avoid strenuous activities and limit their time outdoors. For additional precautions, all Chicagoans *may also consider* wearing masks, limiting their outdoor exposure, moving activities indoors, running air purifiers, and closing windows. (Emphasis added.)

Everywhere the solution to this immense public health problem is presented as an individual issue. No serious protective and preventative public health measures have been taken to ensure the health and safety of the population. The Chicago Department of Public Health waited a full day before issuing an alert on the dangerous air quality and has done nothing to ensure that every resident be provided with N95 masks, improved ventilation or any other public health measures. The same can be said for every major city affected by the wildfire smoke.

In a rational society, not one which subordinates everything to the altar of profit, schools and non-essential production and businesses would be temporarily closed with full compensation provided to affected workers, while essential workers would be given the best protective equipment and ventilation technology available.

However, as has been demonstrated over the last three years by the criminal response of the ruling class to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, this is not how the decaying capitalist profit system operates. The corporate-financial oligarchy which runs society will not tolerate any interruption to the production of profits. Thus, over the past two days, workers in the most polluted areas have been forced to continue working.

Workers from across the Midwest have sent reports to the *World Socialist Web Site* documenting horrific working conditions amid this public health and environmental catastrophe. Forced to work in smoke-filled factories, they have often barely been able to breathe, with many witnessing co-workers collapse on the line. Inside many factories, the air quality has been worse than outside, registering AQI scores of over 200.

A worker at the Warren Truck Assembly plant in Detroit told the WSWS, “It’s muggy and thick in the plant. You can definitely tell a difference in the plant air when you walk outside.”

A worker at the General Motors plant in Flint, Michigan described conditions workers faced Tuesday afternoon and evening:

The air was bad yesterday already but when I walked into the plant for my shift it was even worse. The whole area around the chassis line was filled with thick smog. It smelled real bad too, like chemicals. Everyone was talking about it and taking pictures of the smoke, posting on our local’s Facebook page. Lots of workers were saying that they were having asthma attacks and couldn’t breathe, and their eyes were burning because of the smoke. I heard that someone went down from having an asthma attack too.

Another autoworker commented on social media, “They [the company] won’t do anything until someone with compromised breathing (asthma, emphysema, COPD) literally goes down. And even then, it’s a long shot. They give zero f*** about us. ... Look out for you. No one else does in that place.”

A Dearborn Ford worker commented on social media, “Currently working at the Dearborn Truck Plant being smothered by the smoke. It’s all in the building.”

Not a peep of opposition to these horrendous conditions has come from the trade union bureaucrats, including the newly-elected and DSA-backed United Auto Workers (UAW) President Shawn Fain. As took place at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the union apparatus, dominated by wealthy bureaucrats, has obediently carried out its duties as a labor police force for the ruling class by keeping workers on the job.

The same GM worker told the WSWS:

The UAW didn’t do a single thing and was keeping us working despite the health danger of working in this bad air quality. Our local union chairperson responded to questions on our app about the air quality, dismissing and avoiding the issue, saying people were leaving a few overhead doors open and that’s why the smoke was getting in. He didn’t call for us to walk out or anything. The union doesn’t care about our health and safety. They just want to make sure we don’t walk out no matter how bad things get and to keep making profits for the company. We should all be refusing to work in these hazardous conditions.

The worker at Dearborn Ford commented, “our union [UAW] ain’t sh**. They so-called tested the air quality in the building saying that they don’t detect anything. Straight bullsh**! You can taste it in the air.”

Workers reported “smelling chemicals, something like burning plastic and rubber tires.” This indicates that the smoke from the wildfires, composed of volatile organic compounds (VOCs), through interaction with ultraviolet radiation from the sun has likely created benzene and formaldehyde compounds in the atmosphere. These are toxic air pollutants that can have extremely serious negative health consequences.

The unfolding climate and public health disaster across large portions of the US and Canada, for the second time in less than a month, is yet another devastating exposure of the bankruptcy of the capitalist system. The ruling elites and their representatives in the capitalist political parties and trade unions have nothing but contempt for the working class, whom they view as simply fodder for exploitation.

Workers enduring ever-greater suffering must draw the necessary conclusions. The WSWS urges workers in every industry to organize rank-and-file committees to assert your own independent interests, enforce temporary paid shutdowns, and guarantee that necessary public health measures are taken to protect the population.



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