

As millions across US and Canada continue to suffer the effects of wildfires, Chicago officials bury their heads in the smoke

Our reporters
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The toxic haze produced by wildfires across Canada, which moved into the American Midwest on Tuesday and Wednesday, has begun shifting towards the east. The entire state of Pennsylvania was put on Red alert for Wednesday and Thursday, with slightly better air projected for Friday, when an Orange alert is in effect. There were widespread reports of poor to hazardous air quality in states as far east as New Hampshire, while bad air was spreading as far west as Minnesota, Wisconsin and Illinois.

Some of the worst readings on the Air Quality Index (AQI) Thursday came in Canadian cities, including Sault Ste. Marie and Toronto in Ontario, and Montreal, Quebec. Outdoor sporting activities and concerts have been cancelled or postponed throughout the vast region, both north and south of the US-Canada border, and even outdoor swimming pools have been shut down in the worst-hit areas.

According to the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre, by Monday forest fires have burned 29,393 square miles since January 1, more than triple the previous record of 9,187 square miles, set in 1989. There are nearly 500 fires burning, half of them classified as out of control.

Detroit, Chicago and Minneapolis were among the worst cities in the world for air quality on Tuesday and Wednesday, and a smoky haze still predominated on Thursday, although the AQI began dropping towards more breathable levels. Public authorities urged a temporary halt to all outdoor activities, with special attention to those with respiratory difficulties and other health conditions.

The widespread impact of the toxic air aggravates two interrelated processes—both of them linked to the

global crisis of capitalism. The wildfires are fueled by global warming, both through higher temperatures and the drying out of forest vegetation, making it more susceptible to the spread of fire. The impact of the smoke on both urban and rural areas is drastically worsened by the crisis of public health systems, which collapsed as a result of the onset of COVID-19 and have not been restored, even to the inadequate level that prevailed before the pandemic.

After having the worst recorded air quality on Earth for any large metro region earlier this week, due to the wildfires raging in Canada, the air quality in Chicago, Illinois, continues to chart at “unhealthy” levels, ranging from the 150-160s in the AQI on Thursday, before dropping into the 80s later Thursday. An unhealthy air quality alert continued throughout the day Thursday after the AQI was above 200 three days running.

Although the air quality was at dangerous levels from 4 p.m. on Monday, no official statement was issued by the city until after 10 a.m. Tuesday morning. Commissioner of Chicago Department of Public Health Dr. Alison Arwady tweeted, “Air quality in Chicago is now at an unhealthy level due to wildfire smoke from Canada. Limit your exposure by avoiding strenuous activities and shortening your time outdoors.”

No comprehensive indoor air filtration or respirator guidance was issued, let alone minimal intervention made, like distributing N95 respirators to workers outdoors in the Chicago Transit Authority, USPS and other delivery services, construction, parks and infrastructure.

A local UPS delivery driver told the WSWWS, “I am so pissed right now. I have inhalers but UPS did not give

us masks.”

On Wednesday evening, when the AQI was well above 200, hundreds gathered at Millennium Park for a free concert by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. On Tuesday night, a rock concert at the massive outdoor Northerly Island arena went on as planned. Throughout the week residents could be seen commuting unmasked, jogging in groups, touring landmarks and casually dining outdoors, all while putting their cardiopulmonary health at risk.

The lack of timely warning, serious guidance or substantial preparation and support for residents on the part of Democratic Mayor Brandon Johnson’s administration provoked an angry response from residents and some activists. Johnson was elected earlier this year as a “progressive” with the key support of the unions and the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America, and has been hailed in the press as bringing a “revolutionary” approach to politics.

In a recent statement Johnson simply recommended children, teens, and seniors as well as other higher risk individuals avoid strenuous activity and going outside, and asked Chicagoans to consider wearing masks.

Chicago, like many cities with major transportation hubs and heavy industry, already has a serious air pollution problem without the additional heavy smoke from the climate change-driven fires in Canada. Ground level ozone has long been well above the federal EPA recommendation. For decades, children who grow up in Chicago have suffered from higher than average rates of asthma and allergies linked to pollution.

Following the bipartisan abandonment of public health in relation to COVID-19, the environmental health risks of the smoke are being downplayed and presented as something to be dealt with solely on an individual basis, especially for those in poor health. Businesses and schools have remained open, and no measures have been taken to ensure all Chicago residents have access to high-filtration masks, like an N-95. This approach has been repeated through the affected areas of the US, in cities large and small.

The air quality improved on Thursday after a line of thunderstorms swept through Illinois, taking out power for about 30,000 people in the state capital, Springfield. A state of emergency has been declared. However millions of people in a wide swath of the country, from

Madison, Wisconsin, to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, continued to experience unhealthy air overnight.



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