

Hundreds likely dead in Maui wildfire due to criminal negligence of the capitalist ruling class

Kevin Reed
13 August 2023

The number of confirmed dead from the horrific wildfire on the Hawaiian island of Maui last Tuesday and Wednesday rose to 93 on Sunday. It is now the deadliest such fire in the US in more than 100 years.

On Saturday, authorities said that the work of searching for and identifying the dead was still in the early stages and many more victims were expected to be found, especially in the five-square-mile zone around the town of Lahaina.

Maui Police Chief John Pelletier said that cadaver dogs had covered just 3 percent of the area and the death toll would grow, adding that “none of us really know the size of it yet.” Pelletier said identifying the dead is particularly difficult because “we pick up the remains and they fall apart.”

So far, just two of those who perished in the blaze have been identified. Pelletier told family members that DNA testing would be required to identify their loved ones.

In an interview on CBS’ “Face the Nation” Sunday morning, FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell was asked by reporter Jonathan Vigliotti about the accuracy of reports he had received from “several sources close to the search” that the death toll could reach into the hundreds. Criswell replied, “If that’s what they’re telling you, I wouldn’t second-guess them. They’re the ones that know best on what they’re seeing and how many people have not—been accounted for.”

Hawaii Governor Josh Green said on Saturday that 2,200 buildings were damaged or destroyed, 86 percent of them being residential structures. The cause of the fire is still not determined, although some reports say that winds from Hurricane Dora knocked down power lines, which then ignited dry grasses to set off the blaze.

Three other fires have been reported on the island. Two are still burning, one in south Maui’s Kihei area and the other in the mountainous and inland communities known as Upcountry, where more than 500 homes have been hit with fire. Another fire started on Friday evening in Kaanapali, a

coastal community north of Lahaina, but authorities say it was extinguished.

The scenes posted on social media of structures leveled to the ground and burned out hulks of automobiles on Front Street in Lahaina recall the destructive force of war. Comparing the devastation to the Allied firebombing of German cities in February 1945, Hawaii Emergency Management Agency spokesperson Adam Weintraub told news media, “Some of the aerial footage that we’ve seen from the area reminds me of the pictures from Dresden from World War II.”

Like the Camp Fire, the next most deadly wildfire in the US, which incinerated homes and killed 85 people in Paradise, California in 2018, the Maui fire reached at least 1200°F and melted aluminum engine blocks and car wheels, turning them into pools of liquid.

While the full scale and impact of the wildfire will not be known for days or weeks, it can be stated that the death and destruction from the disaster on Maui are an indictment of the capitalist ruling class and its government and ruling political parties.

Climate scientists and environmentalists had warned about a fire with such devastating consequences for two decades, but critical safety measures were not taken because they cut across capitalist interests.

Elizabeth Pickett, co-executive director of the nonprofit Hawaii Wildfire Management Organization and co-author of a Maui wildfire plan developed in 2014, told the *Wall Street Journal* that measures like “ramping up emergency-response capacity have been stymied by a lack of funding, logistical hurdles in rugged terrain and competing priorities.”

What are these other priorities? While the US government, backed by the corporate media, continuously claims there is no money to build infrastructure and take measures that will prevent such disasters from happening in the first place, there is an endless supply of funds for war and financial bailouts of the banks and corporations.

The US government, through both Democratic and Republican administrations over the past three decades, has spent trillions of dollars on imperialist wars that have killed and displaced millions of people, and, at the same time, funneled similar amounts into the financial system to ensure that money-making for billionaires on Wall Street continued without disruption.

With the wildfire in Maui, there is no longer any doubt that the refusal of the capitalist class to address climate change—the product of decades of reckless, profit-driven pumping of carbon into the atmosphere—is pushing society into an existential catastrophe.

And yet, the response of the political establishment has been an astounding degree of disinterest and the shirking of any responsibility for the disaster. Aside from a three-paragraph White House statement on Thursday, President Biden has said nothing about the staggering loss of life in Hawaii.

Speaking to Jake Tapper on CNN’s “State of the Union” program Sunday morning, US Senator from Hawaii Mazie Hirono, a Democrat, said she was not going to “make excuses for the tragedy.” But when asked by Tapper why officials were so unprepared for the fire, she made the astonishing comment, “I think that we are doing a lot in order to provide the kind of support we need to be providing, but there will always be the call for more.”

This is not the way the people of Maui see the situation. They are shocked and outraged that there were no warnings to residents as the wind-whipped flames were approaching and then engulfing Lahaina. Multiple survivors have told television reporters that there were no officials on the scene to help people escape the flames, no means of communicating with missing loved-ones or contacting hospitals or emergency agencies.

Even days after the worst of the fires had ended, thousands of people left homeless and without food were left to fend for themselves. As of Sunday there were approximately 4,500 people in need of shelter, according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Pacific Disaster Center.

Reports have come in to the *World Socialist Web Site* that the provision of urgently needed food and money for working class residents is being organized and run entirely at the community level, by volunteers. The level of dismay, anger and distrust of the government is palpable within the population.

The island of Maui is a microcosm of the social inequality that exists across America. In recent decades, income disparity in Hawaii has accelerated. According to one study in 2022, the proportion of Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) households in Maui

County, that is, individuals with an income of just over \$35,000 or a family of four with an income of \$72,000, has risen to 52 percent, or more than half the population. This is the highest rate in the state of Hawaii.

Maui is also the location of properties and residences owned by some of the world’s wealthiest individuals. Former CEO and founder of Amazon Jeff Bezos owns a \$78 million, 14-acre estate, surrounded by thousands of acres of dormant lava fields on La Perouse Bay on Valley Isle in Maui. Oprah Winfrey, with a personal wealth of \$2.5 billion, owns 2,000 acres on the island.

Other billionaires who have property on Maui include Paypal co-founder Peter Thiel, Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang and software tycoon David Duffield. Facebook (Meta) CEO Mark Zuckerberg (\$107 billion) and Oracle CEO Larry Ellison (\$141 billion) each own thousands of acres on the Hawaiian islands Lanai and Kauai, near Maui.

These billionaires and others have been buying up land and homes in Hawaii for decades, typically as vacation spots, but also as a place to park their assets. While some of these individuals are silent about the Maui catastrophe, others have come forward with charity activities for public relations purposes.

The Maui wildfire is one of a series of worsening natural disasters—hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, tornados and other ecological catastrophes—that have exposed the criminal negligence of the capitalist class and its institutions. In the case of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, for example, the city of New Orleans was devastated and 1,392 people lost their lives due to the flooding that ensued and the inability and refusal of the government to carry out any effective response measures.

The conditions that have developed in Hawaii, like everywhere else on the planet, attest to the fact that what is required to stop the devastating impact of climate change is the mobilization of the working class internationally against the entire profit system. Only by taking the resources of society out of the hands of the financial elite, which puts private wealth accumulation above human life, and reorganizing them on a planned, socialist basis can the working class prevent the catastrophes created by capitalism.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)