

Biden responds to devastating Maui fire death toll: “No comment”

Jacob Crosse
14 August 2023

As of this writing, 99 people are confirmed dead from the climate change-driven Maui wildfires, making it the deadliest fire in the US in over a century. Even this horrific death toll is a severe undercount as an estimated 1,300 people remain missing as of Monday morning, according to Hawaii Governor Josh Green.

In an interview with CBS News published Monday morning, Green said that while it was “impossible to guess” what the final death toll would be, he expected search and rescue teams to find between 10 and 20 bodies a day for at least the next 10 days. “The fire was so hot ... it’s hard to recognize anybody,” he told reporters.

In interviews and on social media, local residents are beginning to reveal the true extent of the catastrophe. Speaking with *Newsmax* on Monday, local residents Tennille and James Bruggemann confirmed that not only were warnings not issued to residents, but among the dead are likely many school children.

“They could have given us warning,” Tennille said. “They sent all the kids home because of the wind advisory, and we found out yesterday that we lost a whole neighborhood of children.”

James explained that in one neighborhood of the devastated city of Lahaina, “All the kids were home. One of our co-workers messaged us yesterday saying everyone of his friends in the neighborhood is dead.”

On Monday, the stock for Hawaiian Electric plummeted by over 30 percent following the filing of multiple class action lawsuits against the company. The lawsuits accuse the company of failing to de-energize its lines even as hurricane force winds forced the closure of schools prior to the fire.

“All evidence—videos, witness accounts, burn progression, and utility equipment remaining—points to Hawaiian Electric’s equipment being the ignition source of the fire that devastated Lahaina,” Mikal Watts, an attorney with Watts Guerra, said in an interview with *Bloomberg*.

This is not the first time apparent negligence on the part of a for-profit power company has resulted in a massive fire leading to billions in damages and death. The Camp Fire in November 2018, which destroyed virtually the entire town of Paradise, California, killing 86 residents, started due to faulty PG&E (Pacific Gas & Electric) transmission lines which initially sparked the fire. As was the case in Maui, high winds and dry conditions provided ample impetus for the fire to rapidly spread out of control.

Prior to the Maui fire, the National Weather Service in Honolulu had warned at least four times over Twitter/X that dry conditions coupled with the high winds posed a serious fire threat to the region.

These warnings, apparently, went unheeded by the company, which kept the lines energized throughout the fire. Speaking on the financial considerations behind this decision, Mojtaba Sadegh, an associate professor of civil engineering at Boise State University, told *Bloomberg* that it was “tricky” from a “tourist” standpoint for Hawaiian Electric to shut down their lines.

“The de-electrification is not as easy as in remote areas of California, because they know, they understand, they have been living there ... versus a tourist that’s enjoying their vacation.”

Seeking to contain the explosive social anger over several massive failures by the power company and the failure of

government agencies to prepare in advance, issue warnings as the fire was spreading, or provide timely assistance after the fact to the thousands who have lost everything, government officials have been slow to reveal the true extent of the devastation. In the case of President Joe Biden, this has taken the form of refusing to even comment on it publicly.

After spending a weekend riding his bicycle and sitting on the beach in his home state of Delaware, Biden was asked by reporters Sunday if he had any comment on the rising death toll in Maui.

“No. No comment,” Biden replied. The president then flashed a smile and gave a wave before leaving.

This was not the first time Biden was asked by reporters over the weekend to speak on the ongoing catastrophe in Maui. While riding his bicycle Sunday morning, Biden was asked by multiple reporters to comment on Maui. Not even stopping to give his reply, Biden responded tersely, “We’re looking at it.”

Biden’s refusal to publicly comment on the ongoing disaster in Maui and his apparent indifference to the deaths of what is likely hundreds of people, including children, is not solely due to a personality defect or cognitive decline. It is a reflection of the class character of his administration and the US government as a whole. Biden’s callous comments join a long list of indifferent, cruel and lying responses offered by US presidents in response to the deaths of workers and their families.

In April 2020, as thousands of Americans were becoming infected and dying from the rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, then-President Donald Trump infamously suggested Americans inject themselves with a disinfectant to kill COVID-19. “I see the disinfectant that knocks it out in a minute, one minute,” Trump said. “And is there a way we can do something like that by injection inside, or almost a cleaning?”

In September 2017, after Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico, killing upwards of 5,000 people and leaving millions without electricity for months, Trump reluctantly flew to the island weeks later for a photo-op. During the trip, Trump praised himself for the “amazing” response of the US government to the disaster and tossed paper towel rolls at residents like he was shooting a basketball.

In 2016, two years after the city of Flint, Michigan, was first poisoned with lead, then-President Barack Obama, after pretending to take sip of the poisoned water, told residents that their children will “be fine.”

The fact is the US government is not a neutral party that exists to serve and protect the lives and well-being of everyone. As multiple previous “natural disasters,” pandemics and other calamities have shown, the US government exists to serve the interests of the ruling financial oligarchy. This parasitic ruling class, and their bought-and-paid-for politicians in both big business parties, view workers and their families as expendable resources to be cultivated either for profits or to serve as soldiers to advance the interests of US imperialism at home and abroad.

While US presidents, Democratic and Republican alike, ignore or wave off the deaths of workers and their families, when it comes to protecting the interests of the financial oligarchy and Wall Street, no expense is spared or delay permitted.

As the bodies are still being counted in Maui and as survivors struggle to find loved ones and shelter, on Monday, the US Department of Defense announced that another \$200 million in military equipment and ammunition would be sent to Ukraine. The Pentagon noted that the “aid package,” the 44th since mid-2021 totaling nearly \$44 billion, would include “air defense munitions, artillery and tank ammunition, anti-armor weapons, and other equipment.”



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact