

Biden's response to the Maui wildfire: The ruling class indifference to mass death

Kevin Reed
17 August 2023

As the number of confirmed deaths in Maui reached 111 on Thursday, with more than 1,000 people still missing, the unprecedented and horrific character of the wildfire catastrophe continued to emerge. Officials close to the search effort have said the death toll will likely rise into the hundreds or even reach more than 1,000.

Less than half of the burn area of Lahaina, which has been flattened and reduced to ash by the fire, has been searched by crews looking for human remains. As Maui Police Chief John Pelletier put it on Wednesday, “No one has ever seen this that is alive today—not this size, not this number, not this volume. And we’re not done.”

There are very real concerns that hundreds of children perished in the fast-moving flames and extreme heat that swept through Lahaina. School children were told to stay home early the day of the fire because of the dangers posed by high winds from Hurricane Dora, a major factor in the growth and intensity of the wildfire.

In the working class neighborhoods of Lahaina, parents and other family members went to work at area resorts that are located to the east of the island and away from the burn area. These family members left their children at home alone or with relatives. With no warning that the fire was coming, the children would have been trapped in houses that were burned to the ground.

Meanwhile, thousands of survivors have been made homeless by the devastation while Hawaiian officials have outrageously stressed that the island is not closed to tourists, effectively forcing evacuated residents to compete with tourists for housing. Hawaiian Governor Josh Green offered to pay for just 500 hotel rooms, when the number of homes destroyed is more than 2,000.

While the Maui catastrophe is the deadliest US wildfire in 100 years, and possibly the worst in the country's history, one would not know this judging from the response of the Biden administration.

It took Biden three days to declare a “major disaster” in

Hawaii, authorizing federal aid in the recovery effort. The declaration mentioned “grants” and “federal funding,” but said nothing about what the White House itself was doing to provide the emergency relief so desperately needed by Maui residents.

By Sunday, five days after the fire started, President Biden had still not spoken publicly about the disaster. He sat on the beach at his vacation house in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware and, when asked by reporters about the Maui crisis, his first response was “No comment.” While pedaling past reporters on his bicycle, Biden added, “We’re looking at it.”

As public outrage grew and Biden was widely denounced for his inaction, a reference to the Maui fire disaster was inserted into his previously scheduled speech on the economy in Milwaukee on Tuesday. During his bumbling remarks, the president offered survivors an insulting \$700 per household, under conditions where families have lost everything and have no place to live.

On Thursday morning, in a previously recorded video “special message,” Biden said he would travel with his wife Jill to Hawaii on Monday, adding unconvincingly that he intended “to convey in person our grief and solidarity and commitment to the people of Maui.”

Biden's indifference to the death and desperate conditions facing working class families in Maui is the latest in a pattern of behavior by successive US presidents:

- In 2005, in an infamous image of unconcern, George W. Bush was photographed peering out the window of Air Force One while flying over the devastation in New Orleans from Hurricane Katrina. Bush stayed on vacation for days while the crisis unfolded and resulted in the death of 1,836 people in one of the deadliest disasters in US history.

- In 2016, Barack Obama stayed on vacation in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts during unprecedented

flooding in Louisiana that led to 13 deaths.

- In 2017, Donald Trump did nothing to respond to the devastation in Puerto Rico from Hurricane Maria, which killed nearly 3,000 people, while claiming his administration's actions were a great success. His cynical visit to the island reached its low point when he threw rolls of paper towels into a crowd seeking supplies at a shelter.

In each case, the American political establishment demonstrated its indifference to the death and suffering faced by the public from natural disasters, whether it was a Democrat or Republican in the White House.

The willingness of the capitalist ruling class to accept—and facilitate—mass death was taken to a new level in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. From the beginning, public health measures were blocked and shut down in favor of forcing employees back to work and students back to school, as the profits and wealth accumulation of the corporate elite were placed above human life.

Why should the Biden administration and the ruling class as a whole care about the hundreds incinerated in Hawaii when their policies led to the death of more than one million in the US from the pandemic?

Any, even cursory, examination of the causes of the latest catastrophe, as in the previous ones, reveals the consequences of the neglect of social infrastructure, disregard for urgent warnings, and failure to take basic safety precautions.

Maui is not only the site of a disaster. It is a crime scene, for which the ruling class is responsible.

The US has spent trillions of dollars on imperialist wars that have killed and displaced millions of people around the globe. But there has been no deployment of resources to address the crisis from successively more severe disasters driven by climate change. It should be noted that a massive US military base, which includes the Naval Pacific Fleet with six aircraft carriers and 18 nuclear submarines, is located at Pearl Harbor, just 85 miles from Maui.

In the early days of the Hurricane Katrina disaster, the *World Socialist Web Site* Editorial Board issued a statement that summed up the fundamental causes of the indifference of the ruling class to the tragedy that was unfolding:

Hurricane Katrina has laid bare the awful truths of contemporary America—a country torn by the

most intense class divisions, ruled by a corrupt plutocracy that possesses no sense either of social reality or public responsibility, in which millions of its citizens are deemed expendable and cannot depend on any social safety net or public assistance if disaster, in whatever form, strikes.

Washington's response to this human tragedy has been one of gross incompetence and criminal indifference. People have been left to literally die in the streets of a major American city without any assistance for four days. Images of suffering and degradation that resemble the conditions in the most impoverished Third World countries are broadcast daily with virtually no visible response from the government of a country that concentrates the greatest share of wealth in the world. ...

The decisive components of the present tragedy are social and political, not natural. The American ruling elite has for the past three decades been dismantling whatever forms of government regulation and social welfare had been instituted in the preceding period. The present catastrophe is the terrible product of this social and political retrogression.

Eighteen years later, the economic, social and political processes analyzed above have developed qualitatively. The Biden administration is preoccupied with the US-NATO proxy war against Russia and the entire ruling class is beset by an internecine conflict arising from the breakdown of democracy and the emergence of an openly fascist wing of the Republican Party led by Donald Trump.

The lesson of the experiences with disasters such as the horrific wildfire on Maui is the necessity for an independent political struggle by the working class against the capitalist system.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact