Under threat of flames, 22,000 flee Northwest Territories as Canada's record shattering wildfire season continues unabated

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Close to 22,000 people began fleeing Yellowknife, Northwest Territories (NWT) Wednesday under a mandatory evacuation order as wildfires are bearing down on the territorial capital from three sides. Residents of Ndilo, Dettah and those who live along the Neetah Trail have also been ordered to leave. They must take the only road out of town, Highway 3, which passes through one of the areas which is currently engulfed in smoke and flames.

The thousands of evacuees have been directed to drive as much as 1,600 kilometers south to Red Deer, Alberta, a 16-hour drive under good conditions, where they can take shelter and get access to aid. Other cities in Alberta offering shelter include Valleyview (1,148 km south) and Fox Creek (1,236 km south).

An airlift began Thursday afternoon for those who could not drive out of the area. The mass evacuation is the largest in the history of NWT and the largest in Canada since 88,000 fled the devastating Fort McMurray fire in 2016.

"We're all tired of the word unprecedented, yet there is no other way to describe this situation in the Northwest Territories," NWT premier Caroline Cochrane said in a statement Wednesday night. There are currently 236 fires active across the territory and more than half of the province's population has been ordered to leave their homes under threat of wildfires.

Located on the northern shore of the Great Slave Lake and just 400 kilometers south of the Arctic Circle, Yellowknife is the largest city in Northern Canada and is a critical hub for food deliveries as well as medical and social services for the residents of even more remote First Nations and Inuit communities across the region.

CBC News reported Thursday that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau had convened a high-level meeting of the Incident Response Group (IRG) to discuss the situation in NWT and the federal government's response. The IRG is a highly secretive body tasked with formulating the government's response to a "national crisis" or incidents that may impact Canada's "national security." It consists of several government ministers and the heads of the military and intelligence services and was last convened in July in response to the dockworkers' strike in British Columbia.

The Trudeau Liberal government, backed by its trade union and New Democratic Party allies, has nothing to offer when it comes to combatting the devastating consequences of the capitalist system's destruction of the environment. On the contrary, its ruthless pursuit of the interests of big business, including through corporate deregulation and tax exemptions for Canada's oil firms, have helped fuel climate change.

A major concern for the Liberal government since it came to power in 2015 has been to use its "progressive" credentials to secure a spot for Canadian big business in newly emerging "clean energy" sectors. Dressed up as a concern for "environmental protection," the Liberal government's imperialist agenda in this field has been underscored with its embrace of economic nationalism to help secure Canadian and American corporate interests in the rapidly growing global clean energy economy. Meanwhile, the Trudeau government has overseen ruthless austerity by provincial governments, including the gutting of firefighting budgets and other key environmental protection programs. A June 2023 analysis by the *Toronto Star* found that billions of

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dollars in funds pledged by the Trudeau government to combat climate change went unspent.

The Canadian government does not operate a national fire service and has instead relied on the mobilization of the Canadian military and thousands of firefighters from as far away as New Zealand and South Africa to assist the provinces and territories. Four firefighters have so far been killed battling blazes this year, including two deaths in British Columbia.

Driven by the effects of capitalist-induced climate change, Canada's wildfire season has continued at an unprecedented pace and scope since unusually intense fires erupted in early May in the West in Alberta and on the East Coast in Nova Scotia, burning suburban areas of Halifax. Large fires burning in central Quebec have repeatedly released plumes of toxic smoke, choking tens of millions in the US Midwest and East Coast. As of August 17, more than 14 million hectares—roughly twice the size of New Brunswick—had been consumed by flames across Canada, nearly double the record set in 1989.

In the days leading up to the issuing of the evacuation order the mayor of Yellowknife, Rebecca Alty, reassured residents that there was no concern from the fires. She asserted that the city would not provide any details on evacuation plans and issued only an evacuation alert. Officials announced that those in need could shelter at the city's multiplex or camp in a small public parking lot. The city's position changed suddenly mid-week as the flames came within 17 kilometers of Yellowknife's outskirts. At this point, residents were already fleeing on their own accord as smoke fouled the air and turned the sky red.

Cities to the south and west of Yellowknife were evacuated earlier in the week as fires encroached on them. "Over the past 24 hours or so there has been an airlift like this territory has never seen," Northwest Territories fire information officer Mike Westwick told reporters Monday. "Planes flying out of Hay River, planes flying out of Fort Smith, planes flying out of Jean Marie River." The community of Enterprise with nearly 100 residents, has been almost completely destroyed by flames.

According to Canada's Changing Climate Report, published in 2019, the NWT is warming at four times the global rate. This rapid temperature increase promotes the growth of trees and foliage, which can easily ignite in dry conditions, increasing the danger of wildfires. A 2022 assessment published by the Northern Forestry Centre found that mean annual temperatures in the region had increased 2.1°C to 3.9°C between 1950 and 2010.

This year temperatures have soared across the NWT including into the Arctic regions, creating the perfect conditions for wildfires to be ignited by lightning strikes or human activity. "This is sort of the poster child for climate change," Jesse Wagar, a warning preparedness meteorologist with Environment Canada, told CTV News in July. "The rate of the warming in the Arctic is just incredible to watch year over year…it is alarming." Fort Good Hope in far northwest NWT recorded its all-time high temperature on July 8, hitting 37.9 Celsius (100 Fahrenheit). July was the warmest month on record globally.

The capitalist ruling elite bears the ultimate responsibility for the catastrophe in NWT due to the pumping of ever greater amounts of carbon into the atmosphere in pursuit of profit. It has no solution to the climate crisis, which has produced disasters on every continent so far this year. Communities have been devastated from the Hawaiian island of Maui to the Mediterranean and northern China. The international working class must unite globally, irrespective of national boundaries, to confront this worldwide challenge through the fight for socialism, transforming the economy to meet human need and implementing the scientifically guided measures needed to combat climate change and protect millions of lives.

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