

Acting Socialist Party-Podemos government indifferent to wildfires raging across Spain

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28 August 2023

Spain is being devastated by forest fires raging without pause since March and covering 87,000 hectares.

The most serious fire began on August 15 on the Canary Island of Tenerife, home to about one million people and a popular tourist destination known for its diverse volcanic landscapes, pine forests and green valleys, dominated by Mount Teide in the Teide National Park.

According to the regional government, the wildfires have burned 14,700 hectares of forest, 7 percent of the island's surface. It is also affecting 1,000 hectares of the Teide National Park, where, according to the park director, the damage is irreparable. The fire, which forced the evacuation of more than 26,000 people, is the worst in the last 40 years in the Canary Islands—the seven-island archipelago located off the northwest coast of Africa.

The last decade has seen three of the worst years for fires in Spanish history. Last year was even worse, with 309,000 hectares destroyed, representing 39 percent of the 786,049 that burned in all of Europe that year and which, in turn, set the absolute record for the area burned on the continent.

Across Europe, more and more countries are being swept by wildfires. Last year, Romania was the second most affected European country after Spain with nearly 155,000 hectares destroyed, followed by Portugal with more than 104,000 hectares affected, France with more than 66,000 and Italy with almost 59,000.

This year, Greece has already seen 120,000 hectares burn, 0.91 percent of its surface, while Portugal, France, Italy and Cyprus also suffered major fires with more than 0.2 percent of their surface affected by the fire.

Outside of the European Union, wildfires have

devastated countries such as Turkey, Tunisia and Algeria where 40 deaths were recorded as victims of fires in July. In Canada, more than 10 million hectares have burned in recent months with tens of thousands displaced, while the fire on the island of Maui in Hawaii has caused hundreds of deaths.

All these fires have common causes that have nothing to do with chance, bad luck or serial arsonists. These disasters are both foreseeable and preventable if enough resources are invested in forest management and the means to put them out. Above all, they are the devastating consequence of capitalist governments' failure to effectively fight climate change, while imposing mass austerity to pay for imperialist war abroad and the enrichment of the financial aristocracy at home.

Spain has suffered a persistent drought across large swathes of its territory. Heatwaves are now a regular occurrence even before the summer season, with temperatures that in many cases exceed 40 degrees centigrade (104 °F). These factors intersect with a lack of forest management which allows debris and scrub to accumulate, fueling the spread of fires.

This is driving “mega-fires” to break out. These consist of large wildfires of more than 10,000 hectares, with high intensity and speed of propagation. Inazio Martínez de Arano, director of the Mediterranean Regional Office of the European Forestry Institute, told *Atlántico Hoy* that these fires have such an intensity that “they alter the dynamics of the upper layers of the atmosphere and generate winds that can be very difficult to model, so it is not possible for us to predict the behavior of the fire”.

Aridane González, president of the Scientific Committee of the Government of the Canary Islands for Climate Change, explained that fires like the one in

Tenerife are caused by “changes in temperature, humidity, etc., all the ingredients to occur so that fires are more frequent and stronger.” She added that “now we are vulnerable to fires practically all year round, since the climatic conditions have changed”.

The first mega-fires in Spain this year occurred in March and in mid-May in Hurdes and Gata, burning 11,000 hectares, situations unthinkable on those dates just a few years ago.

Given the danger posed by climate change and the fact that 55 percent of the Spanish territory is covered by forests, one would think it would be a priority issue for the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government, in power since 2020. However, according to a Greenpeace study, to date, only 0.1 percent of the money from the European Union Next Generation bailout funds will be dedicated to forest management, while a huge proportion will flow ultimately into the coffers of the banks and corporations.

Funds for forest management amount to around €90 million, but Greenpeace calculates that about €1 billion a year is needed for the proper conservation of forests.

This year, military spending has broken all records, reaching €27 billion along with another €9 billion in other military expenditure approved. This is in addition to the hundreds of millions in financial and military aid sent to Ukraine to boost the war that NATO is waging against Russia in that country.

In addition to the lack of money for prevention, there are not enough resources to put out wildfires. In two of the regions hardest hit, Catalonia and Galicia, firefighters have been on strike against their precarious conditions.

In Catalonia, volunteer firefighters, made up of workers who earn €10 (\$10.80) an hour to help put out wildfires in their free time, declared themselves unavailable to put out fires in various areas of the region. Josep Maria Alcalà, the president of the Association of Voluntary Firefighters of Catalonia, told *El Món*, “we have always been cheap labor” required to be available every day of the year. The firefighters are demanding formal contracts and medical and economic benefits similar to full-time firefighters who respond in the event of an accident.

In Galicia, 500 regional firefighters who work in rural areas declared an indefinite strike on June 15 to demand that the regional government improve their

working conditions. But this is a “phantom strike” sponsored by the trade unions as no worker will take action given the great danger of wildfires, only refusing to work overtime.

The unions have not called for other forms of protest, nor have they coordinated the struggle of these workers with those of other sectors and regions or even with the Portuguese firefighters who face similar situations and have called several strikes throughout the summer.

Spain exemplifies the inability of capitalism to plan and organize the economy to combat climate change, instead squandering valuable resources for war.

Action to end the climate crisis in all its manifestations, including the climate-change-induced wildfires raging across Europe and North America, will not come from an appeal to capitalist governments or pseudo-left forces like Podemos and its new re-brand Sumar. They have shown time and time again their disdain and indifference to human life in their support for war in Ukraine, their murderous defence of Fortress Europe against migrants, the prioritization of profits over lives during the COVID-19 pandemic and now with the wildfires.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote last month, “The capitalist profit system, which organizes society on the basis of the self-interest of the capitalist class, is organically incapable of the massive level of social planning and organization necessary to address the climate crisis.”

Therefore, “the fight against climate change is fundamentally a class question,” which can only be resolved through a political fight led by the working class against the capitalist profit system and for socialism.



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