

"If you were a homeowner, you didn't get the \$700"

Maui wildfire survivors plea for increased aid and insurance payouts as Hawaiian Electric deflects responsibility

Our reporters

29 September 2023

If you are a resident or worker in Maui affected by the fires or impacted in the aftermath and want to share your story click here to contact the WSW.

On Thursday, about 40 people attended a public Hawaii State Senate field hearing at the Lahaina Civic Center on Maui. Hawaii, which became the 50th state of the US in 1959, has been ruled by Democratic Party since 1962. This hearing was led by Democratic state senators Jarrett Keohokalole (representing Windward Oahu), Lorraine Inouye (Hilo), Angus McKelvey (West Maui), Herbert Richards III (north shore of Hawaii Island) and Republican state senator Brenton Awa (Kaneohe, Kahuku, Schofield Barracks).

The hearing was held in-person and on Zoom and led by the five Hawaii state senators to ostensibly put pressure on the state Department of Commerce and Consumer Affairs (DCCA) and the department's insurance division to work harder on behalf of the survivors of the August 8 fire disaster in West Maui which destroyed much of the city of Lahaina.

On display at this hearing, like so many others, was the callous indifference and hostility of the government as working class victims emotionally described their trauma having lost everything.

Several fire survivors spoke passionately about the dire conditions they are facing because of the lack of response by government officials.

Michelle Vu-Tran, a 50-year-old Vietnamese Lahaina resident, testified, "My house is still standing, but it's not livable, I've been displaced since August 8, I haven't seen my house. I called my insurance, and they said my house has not been burned, according to a Google map. But it's a warzone. We cannot live in there. There's no electricity, no water. My car exploded on Front Street as I tried to run away. I got caught in the fire, and I had to jump into the ocean with my husband behind a sea wall for 12 hours. I am so lucky that I am alive."

"There were about 20 cars on Front Street, and anytime a car exploded, we couldn't breathe. I clung to the rocks, I cannot

swim. I couldn't open my eyes because they burned. I thought I was already blind. My throat closed, we drank water just so we could breathe. We thought we died because we couldn't breathe. We tied our hands together to make sure that if our bodies washed to sea, they would find our bodies together."

Vu-Tran added that she and her husband were on the cusp of working fewer days a week before the disaster. "I have two daughters who just graduated. ... We told each other we would soon reduce working to five days a week, so we can enjoy life. But now my life is upside down. My house is not livable. I can't go back... My whole neighborhood burned down.

"My insurance is telling me there is no way it's a total loss, just smoke damage. The insurance is not going to pay us enough. Right now I cannot sleep. At 2:00 every morning I wake up and go to the window to make sure there is no fire. I'm terrified. I cannot live like this. Just driving here my husband took me from Kihei to here, I am scared. The wind blows hard, I'm scared. Someone makes a noise next to me, I'm scared. Who do I contact, and what do I have to do? We are 50 years old. I don't want to take another loan to pay off until I'm 80. I've worked hard my whole life. We are from Vietnam. We worked seven days a week for years to support our kids. This is the only time I need help."

Francisco lost both his family's home and restaurant that was located on Front street in Lahaina. He told the WSW, "The fire started early in the morning. We left around 6 a.m., and we tried to come back and get some belongings. So we walked from Kaanapali to Wahikuli. We went to the house to grab what we could, and the fire was 150 feet away. And by 8:30 a.m. the house was already burning."

"It's really difficult to get help. The house has insurance, and it's taking a while. On the business side because the insurance was just liability they don't cover anything for the fire. It's all just gone. I was sent three checks, but it's far too little to build a house. A four-bedroom house in Maui will cost about \$500,000. FEMA will only grant you \$41,000 but only if you

don't have insurance. So we are on our own."

"If you were a homeowner, you didn't get the \$700 from the government. That was only through FEMA. If you have insurance as a homeowner on the house, you didn't qualify for FEMA aid. That's how corrupt the system is. It's BS. If I have insurance, I was not qualified for the \$700.

"What is happening to all the money? Somebody just donated \$100 million to Lahaina Strong, and lots of donations are coming in. I don't want to sound greedy, but where is the money going? Help it get to the people who need it."

Kalea, a Lahaina resident, told the WSWS, "The anger is universal because of the lack of care by those whose job it was to care." She remarked on the response during the fires, "There were policemen blocking the roads. Why were they so adamant about following that order? Why didn't they let people out? The telephone poles were down and wires were dead for a long time, hours, and the road was closed so there was no southbound traffic. Everyone could have gone north on the southbound road because the poles were lying on the northbound road."

She recalled a traffic gridlock that created a death trap for many residents. "The poles are down, you can't go that way. The fire is behind us, so we are going to die in the fire."

Kalea explained that her home was still standing, and she immediately went back when it was opened up but began to experience breathing issues and congestion in the lungs. Her doctor ordered her to go to the shelter. "I just had a test done on the inside of my house so I know how to clean it. I am waiting for the results. They tested the floors and the walls. I needed those results before I'd start cleaning. They said it would be 72 hours."

"I'm now in a hotel, and they said I had till September 29. That is why I have been frantically trying to clean my house. I got a text last night saying that I am approved for an extended stay."

As Lahaina residents were testifying before the Hawaii state senators in Maui, a separate House hearing on Maui wildfires was taking place Thursday in Capitol Hill in Washington D.C., where Shelee Kimura, President & CEO of Hawaiian Electric; Leodoloff R. Asuncion, chairman of the Hawaii Public Utilities Commission; and Mark B. Glick, Chief Energy Officer of the Hawaii State Energy Office, answered questions from the House Committee on Energy and Commerce.

"I'm trying to answer your questions about why we didn't deenergize. Those decisions were made years earlier as part of a plan, part of the protocols," Kimura declared. "In 2019, our team started developing a wildfire mitigation plan. And based on what they had learned of the plans in California, including their preemptive shut-off programs, they determined that wasn't the appropriate fit for Hawaii. Hawaii is very unique. We have other protocols in place when there are high winds."

Kimura insisted that there were two fires: a fire at 6:30 a.m. that was caused by fallen power lines which was "100%

contained" by the Maui County Fire Department by 9:00 a.m. and that the fire was "extinguished" before they left the scene.

"I want to make it absolutely clear that the afternoon fire, the cause of that fire had not been determined," Kimura emphasized, insisting that Hawaiian Electric has not been deemed responsible for the burning down of Lahaina.

In response to the public calls to bury power lines to reduce wildfire risk, Kimura and Asuncion made clear that the costs of critical life saving measures would not be funded by the federal, state or county governments, but would be placed directly on the backs of workers, emphasizing that such a move would have a significant impact on rate payers.

Furthermore, Kimura pleaded poverty, "Hawaii is the most isolated population on earth, there is no electrical connection to the continental US. This is one of the reasons we have the highest electrical rates in the nation... As utilities go we are small. About 470,000 customers on 5 islands, 70,000 on Maui." However, Hawaiian Electric's parent company, HEI, boasted of a profit of more than \$241 million in 2022.

The responsibility for the catastrophe that has befallen Lahaina residents lies with the capitalist system which subordinates human need to private profit and the politicians in the state and federal government who have proven their inability and refusal to provide necessary relief for the Maui survivors and commit to preventing future disasters. It was Biden who sanctioned the paltry \$700 per household while unlimited funds are allocated for war. Through multiple hearings and townhalls across the island, local and state politicians have sought to suppress enormous opposition boiling over among workers and youth through feigned concern for those desperate for relief.

Similar responses by capitalist governments have been seen in every other major disaster across the planet, from the Libyan floods, to the earthquakes in Morocco and Turkey. Opposition to this requires the mobilization of workers and youth in Lahaina and internationally in a political struggle against the capitalist system and for socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact