

“Our country has shipped off billions to Ukraine, what about us?”

Devastated Lahaina residents demand help and relief as Hawaiian officials announce plan to reopen for tourism

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.

It is now eight weeks since the deadly West Maui fires that officially killed at least 97 people and destroyed much of the city of Lahaina. Officially 31 people remaining missing, a number many residents report as an undercount. About 2,200 properties were consumed by the fire. Some 7,400 residents continue to languish in hotels, with another 1,000 in AirBnB properties, while many are staying with family and friends outside the burn zone.

Many hotels are beginning to receive notifications they will be downgraded into smaller units for displaced residents as Maui Mayor Richard Bissen and Hawaii Governor Josh Green have doubled down on proceeding with an October 8 reopening. After weeks of public outcry, Mayor Bissen announced a “phased-in” reopening plan Wednesday that begins with reopening the Ritz-Carlton West Maui and all hotels from Maui Kapalua to Kahana Villa for tourists.

Starting October 8, the Ritz Carlton will begin accepting reservations from visitors for \$739 a night before fees, while Biden offered a contemptible \$700 per household that residents realized later were only available to those who qualify.

The entire recovery effort is mired in disorganization, bureaucratic red tape and confusion, with no real progress happening to make all the victims of the fire whole. Local community organizations, including many parents and teachers, have mobilized to set up “hubs” to provide urgently needed supplies and food to survivors on a daily basis.

A team of *World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke Friday with Lahaina residents outside the Lahaina Civic Center, which is being used as a disaster relief center.

Dirk, a small business owner whose shop was burned down, told the WSW, “People have to pay their mortgage and have to work so it’s like people who are in the burn zone don’t want to experience that trauma by seeing the tourists having fun, having to serve them, it’s hard. At the same time 90% of our economy is tourism—you drive 15 minutes from here, no one has work, those minimum wage employees who rely on tips are not getting their

tips, and then tourism is down to nothing.

“To reopen or not is the hardest question because it affects everyone. But we need to think realistically, we need to have a cushion for people, financial aid, mortgage deferral, and mental health care, and mental health centers set up down here and all available for free.

“Some people who qualify for unemployment are not qualifying for disaster unemployment assistance. It’s hard, if you have a W-2 or a part-time job they are going to mark that as your income. Because I qualify for that I don’t qualify for disaster assistance. I got 50 bucks a week, what am I supposed to do with that?

“There are people who are calling for civil unrest, when they are pushed towards their most desperate. It’s very dangerous, people can get hurt and killed. We want to make it sustainable. Hopefully we can trust our officials enough to come through.”

On the question of the US/NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, Dirk commented, “That is the worst part, our country has shipped off billions to Ukraine, what about us? That’s our money—taxation without representation. The last time that happened was 1776. I am sick with our federal government. Furious. Biden came here to tell us to go f**k ourselves. \$700 per household, what is that going to do? Clear the land. What has that guy done for us? Jack sh*t.”

Leilani, a retired hotel worker, told the WSW people have been asking, “Should we change to be Ukrainian so we could get some money? ... We need money! \$700 won’t even pay for toilet paper for us! And that \$700 is only for those who qualify.

“So much money goes to the war and nothing for us! And what did he [Biden] do? He came here and said, ‘We will give whatever Hawaii needs.’ But how many billions have gone to Ukraine? They just happened to fund another \$10 billion, right?”

Biden is demanding that Congress pass a further \$21 billion in weapons and aid to Ukraine, adding to the more than \$150 billion that has already been allocated.

According to the Economic Research Organization at the University of Hawaii (UHERO), an estimated 2,000 homes in Lahaina were lost in the fire and many displaced families face the possibility of waiting years for permanent replacement housing. Maui County Property data indicates that the value of

structures—residential, commercial and tourist accommodation—in the burn area totals an estimated \$880 million. However, most of these structures were completely destroyed, and the cost to rebuild may be significantly higher. According to Hawaii Governor Josh Green, total damage is an estimated \$6 billion.

Leilani was born and raised in Lahaina. She currently lives outside Maui. She said, “We have a family home here in Lahaina. Thank god, there was no one home at the time. I am the head of the house and was not here when it happened. I went through the whole process of the fire through text messages and phone calls, at least what we could get through with members of my family, finding out their stories and tragedy.

“Our home was very old, and unfortunately we did not have insurance. Of course, for the first two months since the fire, I already paid for the land tax, for the property. We have the land, we cannot get on it, but we have to pay for it.

“I am concerned about the cleanup. I don’t want them to clean it up, and then they throw me a bill. I’m not agreeing to that. And if you do it on your own, you have to go through some certified person to go clean it up for you. But where is all that waste going? Shipped to the mainland, and where are they putting it? Where can any of us get access to that? How safe is it? I don’t know.”

“For me, I am frustrated. There is no way only 97 people died. I’m sorry. They say there are still 22 missing people. They are only counting someone missing if you document someone as missing. But people have said that there were kids dying. That’s your job to go find out the truth. Kids were at home when the fires happened.

“As parents and residents, we can try and figure these things out. Like, there probably were a number of immigrants not documented. What if there were [undocumented] immigrants in a car and they perished?” Leilani questioned whether in that scenario those deaths would be counted. “It’s not very hard, it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure this out. Be honest, that’s all we are asking!

“Downstairs [at the Lahaina Civic Center] was the original morgue for the people, because there was A/C here. There was a video showing a lot of refrigerator trucks. We are also trying to understand. At one point they said 115 people died, now it’s 97. If there were ten 40-foot refrigerator trucks, how many people were they putting in there?! Now they are saying they are finding pieces of people. It is just not adding up! We are frustrated. We are all adults, and we want to know.”

Leilani also referenced a City Council meeting held on Wednesday where hundreds of residents attended, expressing anger and opposition to the overall response to the fire and ongoing nightmare thousands of residents are facing. The meeting was specifically held to discuss Mayor Bissen’s announcement that tourism in West Maui would reopen by October 8. During the over eight hours of public comment at Wednesday’s meeting, residents expressed outrage at the announcement.

Leilani noted, “People are still asking, ‘What are we going to do? How are we going to get help?’ One of the council members said, ‘We are working on it, but we need five of the panel members [who were present at that meeting] to be in agreement.’ Of course, everyone there was outraged! ‘Take a vote now,’ the

people said. They didn’t, of course.”

On Friday, Lisa Paulson, the executive director of the Maui Hotel and Lodging Association, sent survey data on hotel occupancy levels for October 2 through November 15 to local and state lawmakers, noting the threat of future cuts to jobs and hours, “The membership obviously is very concerned about economic recovery. It could be a dual devastation, with many of our workers who have lost everything that will potentially be losing their jobs or have reduced hours.”

Leilani continued, “What people are feeling is that it has been almost 60 days and the government has not dealt with their housing and grieving. Only now some people are able to get back to their homes. They should have taken care of placing them somewhere until next year! Take care of that first, then talk about opening up. Governor Josh Green is still working on finding housing for people. Everyone needs good housing for a longer term.

“Hawaii is a predominantly Democrat-run state, but people are starting to finally open their eyes to the fact that their mentality is ‘if it doesn’t affect me, then we are fine.’ And, that’s not okay!

“This one guy testified that he had 72 hours to find a place. It’s because the Red Cross did not communicate with the hotel, and the hotel was communicating with him that they needed to get out.

“Communication is the biggest issue with this whole thing. People don’t know where to look for all the right information. It was days where communication was down. I was on the Big Island texting frantically trying to find missing people in my family. So people were trying to get to areas where there was service and electricity. But many people needed gas. It has been a nightmare.

“I can’t directly relate to a lot of these things that they went through since I was not there when it all happened, but I’m there for them, I’m with them, and I’m pissed off.”

The lasting health implications on people impacted by the Camp Fire in Paradise, California, nearly five years ago, are worth drawing as a parallel. A recent entry on the Camp Fire Survivors website from Richie Vargas reads, “I was part of the clean-up recovery crew that took part in removing debris from the town of Paradise, and Concow in 2019. I contracted an auto-immune disease called Sarcoidosis while working this project. It is similar to the illnesses that the 9/11 responders and workers contracted after the attacks. I am looking for individuals who are living with the same effects and are willing to share your story.”

Multiple residents have raised concerns not only regarding the toxicity of the disaster area in terms of air and water quality in the immediate term, but also about long-term health impacts to humans, animals and natural resources.



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