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Report from Lahaina: Maui fire victims face evictions, aid cutoffs

Our reporters
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On Friday, Laurie Allen became the 98th official victim of the August 8 Lahaina wildfires, after fighting for her life for seven weeks at a burn unit in a Honolulu hospital, where she was flown for treatment.

According to the accounts from her husband Perry Allen given to the *New York Times*, Laurie Allen fled from the fires with her landlady Conchita Sagudang, 75, and her son Danilo Sagudang, 55, who fell to flames after they had to abandon their cars and flee on foot. Allen barely escaped with her life, but 73 percent of her body was covered in third-degree burns, which she succumbed to after surgeons and healthcare staff attempted for weeks to care for and attempt skin grafts.

Seven weeks after the fire, the tragedies continue to mount. On Friday, September 29, the Safe Harbor housing plan ended, threatening temporary housing for hundreds of residents. Safe Harbor is an American Red Cross program for relief after a natural disaster, and provides temporary housing to those affected. In the case of Lahaina fire survivors, thousands of residents have been temporarily housed in West Maui hotels and AirBnB properties.

Anyone who had not applied or qualified for Red Cross relief will face further displacement. According to official numbers, an estimated 800 households faced potential expulsion from hotel housing Friday, receiving letters that they would need to vacate within days. Supposedly the expulsion could be cleared up by administrative action with FEMA, but the letters sparked fear among the already displaced.

In the working-class neighborhood of Lahaina, immigrants including the undocumented are among those displaced by the fire. Fearful of immigration authorities and police, they are having a difficult time navigating through the hurdles and they do not have qualifying documents to maintain aid. For many more, they are too afraid to come forward and ask for help for fear of deportation.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with **Eddie**, who is currently assisting a friend facing expulsion from temporary hotel housing. He told the WSW, “Right now I’m on my way to help a friend. When the fire came through, this woman had to leave quickly to save her own life. She doesn’t have papers or documents, things that the authorities are asking people to produce to qualify for aid. Well, she escaped and everything she had was burned in the fire. She has no documents.”

“That’s not right,” he continued. “If you’re missing certain paperwork, you can’t get help. I don’t think that’s fair. People may or may not have had documents but when the fire hit any existing documents for some people burned up. And now they are being expelled. It’s way too soon to be doing this. People are still dealing with the trauma and are barely

getting through.

“The housing situation is a big issue right now, and it is definitely underfunded. Even consider the homeless of Lahaina. They are totally displaced. That bush or tree they slept under is gone, and they now have nowhere to go.”

For several decades, Hawaii has faced high levels of homelessness, with many destitute people living in river valleys, in parks and along beaches. In the face of mounting public anger at the government’s handling of the Lahaina disaster, on September 29, the state together with the nonprofit Project Vision Hawaii opened up a temporary shelter for people who were homeless in Maui before the wildfire.

The site, called Pu’uhonua o Nene, will house 150 adults in multiple military-grade tents sleeping on cots. Officials claim on-site medical facilities, showers and restrooms will be provided, as well as meals and transportation. Nicole Huguenin, co-director of Maui Rapid Response, recently told Hawaii Public Radio that there were over 100 homeless people in Lahaina prior to the fires.

However, this action is an attempt to save face by Hawaiian officials. The shelter barely addresses this growing social problem which is exacerbated by some of the highest costs of living in the nation. Two-bedroom apartments are now renting for \$6,000 a month, a gallon of milk costs \$8, and the vast majority of jobs are tied to the service and hotel industry and tourism which have tanked since the fires.

Eddie continued, “People need a lot of things right now, especially housing, as well as food, medical care, mental health services, everything. Actually there’s not really a problem with getting food. A lot of places are donating food.

“And to me, it feels like martial law, with the presence of the police everywhere, places you can go and can’t go. If you don’t have the right piece of paper, you can’t get help.”

Shannon, a public health worker, also raised concerns about the impact of the fires on working class families and drew connections between the response to the fires and the response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the state: “Hawaii has the most multi-generational families living under one roof. So you’ll find in one studio or one-bedroom apartment, you’ll have 10 people, from a little baby to great-grandma and great-aunties. The impact from a fire or from COVID is insanely huge and not discussed and not recognized and respected.”

Official numbers from the state government indicate that an estimated 500 residential structures were impacted, however because of the high cost of living and many of the homes either rented out to multiple

households or occupied by multiple family members, official figures of people impacted show estimates of over 7,700 residents from more than 3,200 households.

“People basically make nothing here. If the bosses can, they will pay minimum wage. Just this last summer there were a few different positions being flown that wanted a PhD or a doctorate and they were trying to offer \$14 or \$15 an hour, and they were serious. Oh yeah. They do that. And that’s how they keep you scrambling so hard to balance your several jobs to pay your rent. Maybe that way, you can’t notice what Josh Green is doing and how horrible everybody is.

“I just can’t imagine what those families are going through because they have already gone through COVID. That has been more of a slow roaster, but the fires ripped through so quickly, the damage is much more apparent, but it seems very similar.

“I have a friend, who is a healthcare worker, who was having flashbacks and re-traumatization from just hearing all the same exact words from the same people. It’s a big life-altering disaster. The response [to the fires] is the same [as COVID]. There’s no real help. There’s no real care. There’s no real time for healing—physically or mentally—there’s no consideration for people.

“There was no contact tracing or case management with COVID. It was a mess. Most of the time people didn’t get resources or it was like yes, you get them if you check all the boxes, and then it would be like three or four days later or weeks. Parents had to keep calling asking for information and where food was. I know that a similar situation is taking place in Lahaina currently. Many people don’t qualify for relief, so they’re gonna wait them out until they leave, or die.”

Maui officials announced that students are set to begin returning to three of four Lahaina schools in mid-October. Hundreds of children have been bussed to schools on other parts of the island, while some have done distance learning, and many more have not yet enrolled, as parents and families, still reeling from the trauma, have chosen to keep their children at home. King Kamehameha III Elementary was destroyed, but three other schools have supposedly been deemed inhabitable by the Hawaiian Department of Education (DOE).

At a recent public update on Lahaina recovery efforts, Governor Josh Green expressed, “We have to provide our children their education and their families the opportunity to get their kids back on school because that is the most normal thing that our children do.”

Parents and teachers have expressed concerns about the potential health impacts for youth in the schools and residents in the devastated area from the toxic ash and water contamination. Nothing has been said about what conditions will be when the more extensive cleanup begins or when rains push toxins into the water table. Residents have every right to be skeptical, given the recent experiences in East Palestine, Ohio, where residents were given the “all clear” and the EPA refused to test for dioxins in the soil, and in Flint, Michigan, when then President Obama told concerned residents that their children “will be fine” from drinking water from the contaminated Flint River.

The insistence on reopening the schools is bound up with the demands by the ruling elite that workers get back to work and facilitate the resumption of the island’s booming tourism industry. By refusing to give residents sufficient long-term monthly financial assistance to help make all families whole, except for the insulting \$700 for some families, Hawaiian officials are using the poverty of workers to push them back to work, even though most would prefer more time and significant aid, including a halt to mortgages and bills, to help them begin to recover from this trauma.

The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) has played its role in helping to justify the reopening campaign by “polling” workers who are receiving no income and asking them if they wished to return to work. One affected resident told the WSWs, “For the hotel jobs it’s a lot

of ILWU. Those guys know what they want. They had an ILWU meeting that was all about reopening, and it was closed to the public but the governor was there.”

Kekoa, a Lahaina resident who lost his home to the fire, explained how economic issues prior to the fires have only been accelerated: “I worked 18 days straight before the fire with double shifts. Do you know how expensive it is here? We work three jobs to pay the rent. And now that people need places to stay, they’re jacking up the rates. It can be \$6,000 for two bedrooms a month. You have to work two to three jobs.

“I’ve been working since I was 15 years old. At 18 years old, I started working two jobs. Now finally in my forties, maybe I can go to the Mainland for a vacation for a week. Imagine? I’m making \$60,000 a year.

“What about all the people making lower than that? They never get out of here. All those people who lived in the homes that caught on fire downtown were people making less. So all these old ladies and old men were still working to pay off their houses. They never get off this rock and have a vacation. Even though they retired, they still had to work, they still have to pay. So many generations have to work to pay for their houses. That’s messed up, and now they’re being forced to move out of here. First of all, they just went through a horrific thing. And then they’re being forced to sell their land. So all of that is coming to play. You know how that goes.”

The working class in Hawaii is highly diverse, comprised of large sections of immigrant and local labor, most of whom are forced to live in sub-par housing which are often crowded into multi-generational homes due to the exorbitant cost of living. Adding insult to injury, the minimum wage in Hawaii is a poverty-level \$12 an hour.

When the multiracial ruling elite who represent the interests of the hotel chains, airlines and behemoth tourism industry claims it wishes to “get back to normal,” what it means is that they want a resumption and continuation of the super-exploitation of its workforce to keep the profits flowing for the wealthy. Intimately bound up with this ruling elite are the highly paid trade union bureaucracies, such as UNITE HERE, ILWU, and Hawaii State Teachers Association (HSTA), who serve corporate interests.

What workers need are the formation of independent rank-and-file committees organized among workers and youth to put forward demands that begin from the needs of the working class, not big business. These must include the reallocation of billions now allocated for the war in Ukraine to rebuilding and restoring all the homes and small businesses of Lahaina; a halt to mortgage, land tax, and all other bills for residents. Increase emergency relief funds, including guaranteed wages while recovering, free medical care, free mental health services, must be paid out immediately to all residents—immigrant, undocumented, homeless, union and nonunion, old and young. Halt the reopening of schools and businesses until there is full recovery, which will be determined by the working class and medical professionals.

No faith can be put in the politicians who serve the interests of the ruling class and super rich. Instead workers and youth must appeal to each other—to hotel workers, healthcare workers, educators and the working class more broadly—to begin organizing industrial action to demand that the billions directed toward war are used to rebuild Lahaina and make every affected family whole.



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