

Chile's deadly forest fires, climate change and the need for socialism

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Over the course of two days, deadly forest fires engulfed in flames the port city of Viña del Mar and the municipalities of Quilpué, Limache and Villa Alemana in Chile's Valparaiso Province, leaving at least 131 people dead as of Thursday, with hundreds more missing. This, the worst fire disaster in the country's history, is a consequence primarily of a capitalist-made climate crisis that is with increasing frequency devastating populations in every corner of the planet.

The extent and scale of their impact on working class communities is at the same time the direct result of decades of sociopathic policies—in Chile begun half a century ago under Gen. Augusto Pinochet's brutal US-backed military dictatorship—that place the fruits of society's labor, its wealth and its resources at the disposal of a numerically minuscule and parasitic corporate and financial elite.

The inferno in Valparaiso, home to over 1 million people, is the deadliest wildfire globally since the catastrophic 2009 fires in Australia, and the deadliest disaster in Chile since the 2010 earthquake.

But, like the COVID-19 pandemic, and every health, social, economic, and environmental crisis preceding it, the fires disproportionately affected the poor "barrios" and shantytowns, some of which lacked running water, sewer systems, electricity, broadband, paved roads and even fire hydrants, which would have given the people at least a fighting chance to save lives.

The death toll of 131, reported Wednesday, will almost certainly rise, with more than 300 people remaining unaccounted for. Another 40,000 of the fire's victims were left with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Some 12,000 homes, family businesses and local stores, along with a vast number of vehicles, were reduced to smoldering ash. Unable to drive down the hilly topography due to the narrow, poorly constructed roads of working class Valparaiso, many residents were forced to flee on foot.

The wildfire season is far from over. Chile's Central and Central South regions, predominantly regional and rural areas, were the scene, exactly one year ago of massive wildfires, which killed two dozen people and razed more than 400,000 hectares as the southern hemisphere hit record high temperatures and suffered gale winds amid a decade-long drought.

Some 9,000 kilometers north in California, home to more than 39 million people, several counties were declared disaster areas because an unprecedented rain dumped half a year's worth of water in a week, producing flash flooding and hundreds of deadly mudslides. The number of deaths climbed to nine this past Tuesday.

Matters are made worse by the fact that less than 1 percent of the 7.7 million households will be indemnified due to the lack of insurance for flooding, reported the *Los Angeles Times* Feb 7. For five years straight, the state had battled some of its largest wildfires ever recorded due to severe drought and ever-rising temperatures, that is until 2023, when the "atmospheric river" phenomenon marked its appearance.

Important new research by the Australian National University revealed last month that record heat across the world had profoundly impacted the global water cycle in 2023, contributing to severe storms, floods, megadroughts and bushfires. The report underscored that the trend towards drier and more extreme conditions was the consequence of persistent fossil fuel burning.

The researchers from the ANU and the Global Water Monitor Consortium based their findings on data from thousands of ground stations and satellites orbiting the Earth to provide real-time information on rainfall, air temperature, air humidity, soil and groundwater conditions, vegetation, river flows, flooding, and lake volumes.

"Record-breaking heat waves swept across the globe in 2023, shattering previous records, from Canada to Brazil and from Spain to Thailand," explained Professor Albert Van Dijk, lead author of the study published last month. "The events of 2023 show how ongoing climate change is threatening our planet and lives more with every passing year."

Extremely hot and dry conditions inflicted extensive ecological damage on the world's largest forests. Massive wildfires ravaged Canada during the northern summer, while the Amazon rainforest and rivers rapidly descended into severe drought in late 2023.

Megafires and fossil fuel burning were in turn raising sea surface and air temperatures, increasing the strength and rainfall intensity of monsoons, cyclones, and other storm systems.

Such studies should be the basis for anticipating and preparing for environmental calamities as the preliminary step to addressing the cause of climate change. This would require the commitment of substantial resources and developing a massive emergency team on a global scale, equipped with the latest technologies, machinery, and scientifically grounded disaster management information and techniques.

But to even suggest such a proposal in the present epoch of imperialist decay, where rival capitalist nation-states scramble to gut public spending to attract internationally mobile capital, is a reactionary exercise in self-deception.

Not one bourgeois government, whether professedly “left” or right dares risk the consequences of hampering the accumulation of private profit of the native bourgeoisie or their imperialist masters—the precipitous drop in the value of stocks and shares and the collapse of the currency would impact just as severely as any natural disaster.

Instead, capitalist governments of every stripe stoop to the lowest common denominator: to law-and-order demagoguery or worse, to scapegoating migrants, refugees, the indigenous and the youth, the most vulnerable sectors of the population, for the interminable social ills produced by capitalism.

Last August, amid the devastating wildfires that swept the Evros region bordering Turkey, the right-wing Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis told a press conference that “It is almost certain that the cause is man-made. And it is almost certain that it was lit on routes used by illegal migrants.” He let loose a witch-hunt against asylum seekers.

Mitsotakis’ filthy scapegoating and refugee-baiting are today’s norm.

In Chile, for the past year and a half, amid rising unemployment, high inflation and interest rate hikes, environmental catastrophes, a housing shortage crisis and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Broad Front-Communist-Socialist ruling coalition has adopted the ultra-right’s mantra, maintaining that the priority of the government is “defeating delinquency, violent crime, drug trafficking and the proliferation of firearms.” It has, with the help of the right and the corporate media, profiled migrants and the indigenous Mapuche communities as the root cause of all the problems and deployed the military against them.

Last week, President Gabriel Boric went one step further, convening a dictatorship relic known the “National Security Council” to facilitate use of the Armed Forces in policing operations in working class neighborhoods, under the guise of protecting “critical infrastructure.”

Then, in response to the Valparaiso tragedy last Friday, Boric pledged to use the full weight of the state apparatus, the police, intelligence, and the Armed Forces—that is the very institutions with a track record stretching more than a century of committing horrendous crimes against those struggling for social equality and democratic rights—to deal with real and imagined arsonists, organized crime and delinquents.

“It is difficult to believe that there could exist such miserable and wretched people capable of causing so much death and pain. But if these people exist, we will look for them and we will find them,” Boric said in a news conference announcing that his pseudo-left government would decree a State of Exception, placing the National Defense forces in charge of Valparaiso.

This was followed up by the head of National Defense, Rear Adm. Daniel Muñoz, who on Monday claimed that there existed evidence that the fires were planned. “In the origins there are indications, as far as we know, of a pattern of behavior that indicates there was planning, something orchestrated and organized,” Muñoz said.

It is under these unrelenting provocations that the growth of vigilantism has emerged and, in the process, diverted the population, legitimately enraged at the total absence of any official fire warnings and the delayed and paltry government support, into a frenzied lynch mob against “outsiders.” In one of many similar incidents egged on by the corporate media, two Venezuelan migrants were nearly lynched by angry residents for purportedly attempting to start a fire. They were later released by the cops due to the complete lack of evidence.

In many ways, Boric and his coterie of “lefts” are outdoing his presidential opponent, José Antonio Kast, a rabidly xenophobic demagogue and fascistic putschist who for the last seven years has set the tone of official bourgeois politics. It bears noting that Kast applauded the convening of the National Security Council, though his desire is for the full-fledged restoration of military rule.

The entire ruling establishment and media have exploited the fires to escalate the atmosphere of paranoia about “organized crime” and promote the need for a strong hand. In the open they are conditioning the population to the militarization of society and a police state, while behind the scenes they are preparing for dictatorship. This phenomenon is underway internationally.

The role of the pseudo-left has been central. They banked on the masses buying into their promise to end Pinochet’s “neoliberal” free-market nostrums the better to suppress the mass rebellion of the working class that exploded to the surface in 2019. They have succeeded only in safeguarding Pinochet’s legacy, which was a key factor in the fires, and is now paving the way for the far right.



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