

Early Canadian wildfire season prompts fears of repeat of 2023 record-breaking year

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30 May 2024

Canada's 2024 wildfire season has started early, prompting fears that the country could see a return of the devastating nationwide fires of last year that forced thousands to flee their homes and choked millions across North America with smoke. The fires are a direct result of capitalist-induced climate change, with governments of all political stripes at the federal and provincial levels creating conditions for worsening infernos and withholding the resources necessary to address the growing crisis.

The wildfires are currently concentrated in the western Canadian provinces of British Columbia (BC) and Alberta, the Northwest Territories, as well as the prairie province of Manitoba. The majority, around 112, are burning in BC, with a further 31 in Alberta and nine in Manitoba.

Thousands of people have been evacuated from communities near the fires. Nine fires in BC are considered burning out of control, including those in the vicinity of the community of Fort Nelson, where approximately 3,500 residents have been evacuated.

A large fire near the city of Flin Flon in Manitoba is now considered to be under control, but not before about 700 residents were forced to evacuate.

Around 6,600 residents of southern Fort McMurray, Alberta,—the center of Canada's carbon-intensive oil sands extraction industry—which experienced a massive wildfire in 2016 that became the country's single costliest natural disaster, were evacuated in response to nearby fires this month, but have since returned to their homes. The fires continue to burn but are considered contained.

The province of Quebec, which saw around 164 active wildfires at the peak of the record-breaking 2023 fire season, has had a relatively muted start to the year, although there have already been over 80 wildfires. Scientists believe that more moist conditions and the lack of a severe spring drought in the province account for the lower number of fires.

While cooler temperatures and rain have helped subdue several of the larger wildfires in western Canada, projections show warmer overall temperatures going into the summer, exacerbated by the effects of El Niño. This past winter witnessed lower-than-average precipitation, producing favourable conditions for late spring and summer droughts,

which provide fuel for fires.

“Early projections for 2024 indicate the potential for early and above-normal fire activity over the spring months as a result of ongoing drought forecasts,” according to federal Energy and Natural Resources Minister Jonathan Wilkinson. The Liberal cabinet minister issued the warning at an April press conference about expectations for the 2024 wildfire season.

“Wildfires have always occurred across Canada. What is new is their frequency and their intensity. And the science is clear: the root cause of this is climate change,” Wilkinson added.

Combating this worsening epidemic of wildfires are a dwindling number of poorly paid wildfire firefighters. Seasonal firefighters in Alberta start at a woeful \$22.44 per hour, rising to \$27.58 in BC and \$30.52 in the Parks Canada firefighting service.

Wildfire firefighters in Quebec earn little more than \$20 per hour. Daniel Cloutier, director of the Quebec branch of UNIFOR, which represents the firefighters, admitted that there is high turnover for these positions because of the low pay. Because the firefighters are considered an “essential service,” they are not permitted to strike, despite voting overwhelmingly to strike this May. UNIFOR's response, as part of its program of maintaining the collective bargaining framework used to suppress workers' struggles, has been to throw its hands in the air and claim that nothing can be done to oppose these attacks on workers' democratic rights.

The majority of firefighters in Canada are volunteers, and their ranks have been dropping steadily, from 126,000 in 2016 to 90,000 in recent years. The dangerous nature of these jobs and poor compensation have forced thousands to leave the service.

The precarious nature of volunteer firefighters' jobs is part of the decades-long ruling class attack on workers' jobs and social conditions more generally. While worker pay has stagnated for decades, and mass layoffs abound as a result of the central banks' consciously-directed high-interest rate regime, the profitability of Canadian corporations and the wealth and income of the top 10 percent of society has soared, particularly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Like last year, many of the wildfires are burning near the

Arctic Circle in boreal peatland forests, which span the length of the country's northern regions. These peatlands are natural carbon dioxide sinks, but decades of logging and oil and gas extraction have laid waste to wide swaths of these ecosystems, releasing millions of tonnes of carbon emissions. This has played a significant role in raising global temperatures, thereby making wildfire seasons longer and more intense.

In a 2023 interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*, Canadian forest fire scientist Dr. Ellen Whitman described how more frequent and larger wildfires modify the typically resilient coniferous boreal forests, potentially inducing a shift in forest type towards one dominated by broadleaf trees, which are less resilient to wildfires.

Last year's Canadian wildfires were the worst on record, burning approximately 18 million hectares (44.5 million acres) of forest. Over 150,000 people were evacuated from their homes as a result of the wildfires. At least 17 people died as a direct result of the fires, including four firefighters.

The wildfires also blanketed much of North America with toxic soot for weeks on end. Air quality indexes in cities far removed from the fires, from Montreal to New York City and beyond, ranked among the worst in the world. Workers in auto factories across the American Midwest reported to the WSWs that colleagues collapsed from the smoke, while management forced production to continue.

The fires released billions of kilograms of carbon emissions. Compounds harmful to the human body, including PM2.5 fine organic particulate matter, were dispersed over urban areas containing hundreds of millions of people. These compounds pose severe and prolonged health risks to the body's respiratory, cardiovascular, and neurological systems. They also come with significant risks of developing cancer and harming infants in the womb.

The full extent of societal damage caused by the 2023 wildfires has yet to be determined. However, both Health Canada and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported spikes in visits to emergency rooms for respiratory illnesses while the fires burned. Health Canada estimates that between 2013 and 2018, up to 240 premature deaths per year could be attributed to short-term exposure to PM2.5 particulates, and 2,500 deaths per year to long-term exposure.

Governments on both sides of the US-Canada border, spanning the political spectrum from right-wing to ostensibly "left," have framed the issue as one of individual responsibility. No systematic action was taken to protect the population from the wildfire smoke. Instead, workers were made to continue working without adequate PPE or ventilation.

Provincial governments like the BC New Democratic Party (NDP), which is backed by the trade union bureaucracy, slashed wildfire budgets by hundreds of millions of dollars prior to the 2023 fires, and have not restored that funding. The ruling Manitoba NDP similarly halved the budget for natural

emergencies to \$50 million, even lower than their Progressive Conservative forerunners.

The Justin Trudeau-led federal Liberal government, despite its claims to be a "greener" alternative to the Conservatives, has repeatedly prioritized the fossil fuel industry, including ramming through the Trans Mountain Pipeline expansion project. In the process, they have de facto criminalized protests against the project by environmental and indigenous groups. The pipeline expansion is seen as vital to the Canadian energy sector, which is gaining importance as Canada, in alliance with the United States, ramps up for war against Russia and China.

This stance is in no way contradicted by the Trudeau government's frequent pledges to secure Canada's place in the global "clean energy" economy. This strategy, supported by the union bureaucracy and multi-billion government subsidies to attract highly profitable global corporations, is based on the ruthless exploitation of Canada's rich supplies of natural resources, and the miners and other workers tasked with extracting and refining them. The Trudeau government's goal in stepping up the exploitation of metals and rare earths is to secure a ready source of materials necessary for supplying its war machine and those of its allies, first and foremost American imperialism.

Despite pledging \$800 million in funding to fight wildfires, Natural Resources Canada had spent under \$20 million as of April 2023. There is no centralized government response to wildfires, which would require a substantial infusion of resources to address the deepening crisis. The fragmented character of the wildfire response is designed to cost as little as possible so that society's resources can be freed up for war and enriching the wealthy.

Combating the growth of deadly wildfires and climate change more generally is a global task that can be accomplished only under the political leadership of the working class fighting for a socialist program. Only in a society based on prioritizing human need over private profit, that has abolished the outmoded nation-state system, will it be possible to develop the global scientific plan required to deal with climate change and all its related ills. These ills are not the product of "human beings" in the abstract or "progress," as demoralized middle-class environmentalists claim, but the rapacious demands of the capitalist profit system.



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