

“It was utter chaos”

# Wildfires erupt across Southern California amid sweltering heat wave

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Over the past week, three large fires have erupted across Southern California in Riverside, San Bernardino and Orange counties, prompting local and state authorities to issue a state of emergency as they threaten lives, homes and air quality. The smoke is so thick that satellite views of the entire area show one large plume.

The fires occurred at the same time that a massive triple-digit heat wave affected the region, causing an undercounted number of deaths, according to Dr. David Eisenman, a professor at UCLA. Without a doubt, a record hot and dry summer, following a wet winter, set the stage for fires to expand rapidly.

The Airport Fire, bordering Orange and Riverside counties, was reportedly caused by public works equipment that caught fire in the area, a fact that points to the dangerous degree of obsolescence in infrastructure.

Some 1,400 homes have been evacuated, some of which were destroyed, and 1,000 firefighters were at the scene while anticipated thunderstorms could ignite new flames at any moment. At least 10 firefighters reported injuries, while one civilian suffered a medical emergency and another civilian reported unspecified burns.

The fire started Monday, September 9, in the afternoon and ballooned rapidly to 19,000 acres by Tuesday night. It currently encompasses more than 23,000 acres with 5 percent of the fire being contained as of this writing.

The severity of the blaze required the mandatory evacuation of the Robinson Ranch community in Rancho Santa Margarita as well as voluntary evacuation warnings for at least eight additional locations directly under threat.

The Line Fire in San Bernardino County started Thursday, September 5 and has spread to more than 37,000 acres, prompting evacuation orders for 9,200 homes, with only 18 percent of the fire contained as of Thursday morning. The size of the fire required the

deployment of more than 3,000 firefighters, a number that is still utterly inadequate for a fire of that proportion.

At least 100 Amazon workers from the KSBD airhub in San Bernardino, many wearing protective masks, angrily confronted management on Wednesday complaining about the smoke in and around the warehouse. The company issued a back-to-work order after a two-day closure, while evacuations are taking place in adjacent areas and workers' lives are being placed in danger by the corporation.

The Bridge Fire, the largest of the three so far, started on Tuesday, September 10 when it covered only 4,000 acres but then exploded to over 34,000 acres within a matter of hours.

The Bridge Fire currently stands at over 50,000 acres with 0 percent of it being contained as of this writing. Some 5,500 homes have been evacuated and dozens destroyed. Evacuation orders were given selectively and at the last minute, exposing many residents to the risk of being injured or killed in their homes. In the affected city of Wrightwood, California, the speed of the fires and the lack of advance warnings caught residents unprepared where many had to leave their property and pets behind.

“I’ve been a Wrightwood resident for 30 years,” John Haskell told KCAL News. “I’ve been through a lot of fires and I’ve never seen it move that fast...It reminds me of what we saw at Paradise [in 2018].”

The severity of the situation was underscored by Wrightwood resident Leah Potter: “Within minutes it went from blue skies to just dark.”

“You couldn’t even breathe,” Potter added. “We couldn’t even see anything, the smoke was hurting our lungs and we decided to leave on our own and then we got an alert as we’re packing up and the roads were bumper to bumper and it was utter chaos.”

Potter complained, “There were no evacuation warnings, there were no police coming up or down the streets, we just had to run for our lives. It was basically up to us because there was no direction and no evacuation warning until we were already packed up and bumper to bumper gridlocked when we got the evacuation notice ... and I had to leave my chickens.”

These scenes recall the horrors of the 2018 Camp Fire in Paradise, California and the blaze which overtook Lahaina on the island of Maui in Hawaii, last year where the failure of the state to deliver prompt evacuation orders led to many preventable deaths.

While local and state firefighters focus on the three massive fires in Southern California, there are at least 18 smaller fires burning around the same area which have not been fully contained.

“We are getting resources released from fires like the Roblar Fire or Boone Fire,” Cal Fire Battalion Chief Todd Hopkins said on Tuesday. “Resources are being reassigned to [the Airport fire] or some of the other fires that are ongoing in the south.”

In Nevada, September 10 marked 100 days that the city of Las Vegas experienced temperatures of 100 degrees or more, according to the National Weather Service. The city has reported 224 heat-related deaths so far this year, set to eclipse last year’s death toll of 309, a certain undercount.

Nevada has been dealing with the massive Davis Fire, south of Reno, where on Tuesday Fire Chief Charles Moore warned residents to prepare for evacuation as authorities anticipated a change in fire weather to create a rare, “particularly dangerous situation” that was “a step above a red flag warning.”

Even the typically moderate state of Oregon is stretched thin this fire season, with state and federal fire agencies currently occupied with other fires all along the West Coast.

“There are a finite number of resources and with this much activity, we are always going to be short of firefighters,” Adrienne Freeman, a spokesperson for the US Forest Service, said.

The fire season in Oregon has already burned a record, reaching 1.8 million acres so far this year, yet authorities have not deployed enough personnel to adequately address the fire season.

“A lot of our firefighters are college students who are usually in college for a forestry degree and this is their summer job,” Jessica Neujahr, spokesperson for the Oregon Department of Forestry, said. “Once school starts back up, we lose a significant portion of our workforce.”

Wildfires have been a part of the West Coast ecosystem for centuries, particularly in California, and the knowledge of how to properly manage them is widely known and could be implemented immediately.

As with all natural disasters that are fueled and exacerbated by capitalist-driven climate change, the occurrence and predictability of such powerful, natural events should give rise to a rational response, including all necessary preventative measures to alleviate or neutralize their danger.

However, what is restraining any rational response to these fires is the global crisis of capitalism, where the ruling class is unable and unwilling to organize society’s resources to prevent yearly and highly preventable natural catastrophes.

Despite being the wealthiest state in the wealthiest capitalist country in the world, the capitalist class of America, and the 186 billionaires residing in California, cannot muster the necessary resources needed to combat climate change and the yearly fire seasons that come along with it.

The ruling class, preparing for war abroad and dictatorship at home, has no plans to prevent future wildfires nor any intention in stopping capitalist-driven climate change. As they see it, all social resources must be deployed for the preservation of their wealth and privilege.

Only the working class, the only revolutionary class in modern society, can take control of society’s resources and reorganize it to combat climate change and all the monumental problems which we face in the 21st century.



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