

The Los Angeles inferno: A historic crime of capitalism

Niles Niemuth
9 January 2025

California is facing what could be its most devastating wildfire in history, with fires burning uncontrolled throughout Los Angeles County. Images shared widely on social media show whole neighborhoods and city block after city block completely burned to the ground, amid reports that firefighters have been unable to even access water to extinguish the flames as their lines have run dry.

Despite the region's immense wealth, the lack of adequate firefighting resources and decrepit infrastructure have left many communities defenseless against the flames. California, home to 186 billionaires, the most of any US state, has proven unable to protect its citizens from the ravages of climate change-fueled wildfires.

Evacuation orders have been issued for parts of Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside, Ventura and Santa Barbara counties, with the scale of the disaster overwhelming emergency services. To date, 100,000 people have been ordered to leave their homes under the threat of flames, and it is estimated insured losses could reach \$10 billion or more.

According to the latest reports, more than 1,000 structures, mostly homes, have been destroyed in Los Angeles County, and at least five deaths have been confirmed. Seven active fires are currently burning, with zero percent containment. Over 27,000 acres have already been scorched, and the confirmed death toll is expected to rise significantly.

Residents have shared harrowing accounts on social media, describing scenes of entire neighborhoods being consumed by the fires. Many were forced to make the agonizing decision to flee their homes as embers surrounded them, with some becoming trapped in their vehicles. Others were unable to flee as the flames bore down, becoming trapped in their homes. The lack of

early evacuation orders, despite Red Flag Warnings, has exacerbated the crisis.

Another key factor contributing to the disaster is the severe shortage of firefighters. Firefighters are being flown in from neighboring states like Nevada, Oregon, and Washington, as local resources have been depleted. This shortage can be directly attributed to recent budget cuts signed by Democratic Mayor Karen Bass, with the Los Angeles Fire Department seeing a \$17.6 million reduction, while the police department received a \$126 million increase.

Democratic-controlled California is notorious for exploiting the labor of prison inmates to fight wildfires, paying them as little as \$5.80 per day and \$1 per hour when responding to a disaster, much less than the \$28 per hour which is paid to an average firefighter.

Smoke from the fires has spread across the most populated county in the United States, putting up to 10 million at risk of the effects of inhaling carcinogenic particulates.

The spark for the firestorm was provided by the Santa Ana winds whipping down from inland mountain passes, bringing gusts of up to 100 miles per hour, the equivalent of a Category 2 hurricane. These same winds have spread embers up to a mile away, challenging efforts to confront the flames.

The tinder was provided by extremely dry conditions fueled by climate change. Los Angeles County and much of Southern California are in drought conditions, having recorded no significant rainfall for eight months.

Directly affected communities include the neighborhood of Pacific Palisades west of Santa Monica, hit by what the media has described as the "worst-case scenario." The Palisades Fire had consumed more than 5,000 acres and was completely

uncontained as of Wednesday morning. The communities of Altadena and Pasadena, north of downtown LA, were hit hard Tuesday night as the Eaton Fire erupted. Another major blaze, the Hurst Fire, is burning just north of Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley.

Aside from the super-rich, full recovery for the thousands who have been displaced will prove nearly impossible. Many will be added to the growing number of homeless, who numbered over 75,000 last year in Los Angeles County. The problem is compounded by the decision of insurance companies, such as State Farm, one of the largest in California and the US, to cancel hundreds of homeowners' coverage in Pacific Palisades last summer, citing it as a high-risk area that is no longer profitable as the frequency and intensity of wildfires increases, fueled by climate change.

The fire disaster in Los Angeles stands as an indictment of the entire social and economic order in the United States. It is only the latest in a string of catastrophes driven by the intersection of immense levels of social inequality and worsening impacts of climate change, such as the devastating flooding from Hurricane Helene, which killed more than 100 people in western North Carolina and left thousands homeless last year.

Even as the flames were spreading in Los Angeles on Tuesday, President-elect Donald Trump, who is set to take office for a second term in under two weeks, spoke at a press conference where he promised to block the building of renewable energy sources, focusing his ire on wind turbines. Far from paring back fossil fuel use, the Biden administration has overseen a boom in oil drilling, approving more permits than the prior Trump administration. The US produced more than 4.6 billion barrels of oil in 2024, an all time record.

The Democrats meanwhile are also responsible for slashing funding for fire fighting and prevention resources and underfunding limited measures to combat the most extreme effects of climate change. An increasingly doddering President Joe Biden, on a visit to an emergency response center in Los Angeles, read out a boilerplate message about the federal aid supposedly on its way, before announcing excitedly that he had just become a great-grandfather.

The problem of climate change is not a local or national issue, it is a question that confronts billions

around the world, putting everyone at increased risk from drought, fires, flooding and famine. Nor is confronting climate change a matter of reform or tinkering around the edges of capitalism to make it "greener." It is a matter ultimately of striking at the root—the anarchic and irrational capitalist system.

The measures necessary to combat and reverse its effects, which have been clear to scientists on the front lines for many decades, can only be implemented by an international movement of the working class which can take control of the levers of economic production into their own hands to put an end to social inequality and secure the safety of the world's population without regard for profit interests.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact