

Republicans threaten to withhold federal support to Californians devastated by raging infernos

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The WSWS asks all our readers in the Los Angeles area to write to us here or comment below about their experiences with the fires.

As climate change-powered fires continue to rage in and around the greater Los Angeles area, with at least 24 reported dead so far, leading congressional Republicans signaled their intent to condition federal aid to California due to alleged “mismanagement” by state and local officials.

As he was walking through the Capitol in Washington on Monday, Speaker of the House Mike Johnson was asked by CNN’s Manu Raju if he was “open” to providing federal aid to California “without any conditions.” Johnson replied that there needed to be a “serious conversation about that.”

“Obviously there has been water resource mismanagement, forest management mistakes, all sorts of problems and it does come to leadership, and it appears to us that state and local leaders were derelict in their duty in many respects so that is something that has to be factored in.”

Johnson continued, “I think there should be conditions on that aid. That’s my personal view, we’ll see what the consensus is,” adding, “It will be part of the discussion for sure.”

Despite the ongoing danger and the high likelihood that the damage and death toll will continue to rise, Alabama Senator Tommy Tuberville, a staunch ally of President-elect Donald Trump, similarly voiced his support for withholding federal support to devastated residents because voters in the state have elected Democrats.

Asked by Newsmax’s Chris Salcedo, “Why should other states be bailing out California for choosing the wrong people to run their state?” Tuberville replied, “We shouldn’t be.”

The former college football coach acknowledged that while there were “a lot of Republicans” in California, but “they are just overwhelmed by these inner city woke policies with the people that vote for them. And I don’t mind sending them some money, but unless they show they are going to change their ways and get back to building dams and storing water, doing the maintenance with the brush and the trees and everything everybody else does in the country and they refuse to do it.”

Tuberville concluded, “They don’t deserve anything, to be honest with you, unless they show us they are going to make some changes.”

Tuberville and Johnson’s threats to withhold federal aid echo previous threats levied by Trump against California Democrats, specifically Governor Gavin Newsom. While campaigning in California last September, Trump threatened not to give Newsom “money to put out all his fires,” if Newsom did not agree to divert

more water towards agricultural interests.

While the return of Trump and his cabinet of billionaires to the White House will mark a further erosion in federal funding efforts to combat wildfires and other climate-related catastrophes, under the Democrats, as well as Republicans, money to prevent wildfires has continued to be slashed.

In a January 11 article on the lack of preparation for the Los Angeles fires, the *Washington Post* noted that the effort to clear vegetation and conduct controlled burns “is expensive and, at the federal level, is underfunded. In 2022, the Biden administration announced a plan to reduce the fire risk on 50 million acres of land, an effort it estimated would cost around \$50 billion. But it was only partially funded, with \$3 billion from the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.”

While there is “no money” to reduce wildfire risks, on Monday President Biden announced that the next two nuclear-powered aircraft carriers to be built at the cost of roughly \$15 billion apiece, would be named for former presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush.

As of this writing, over 12,300 structures, the majority of them family homes, have been destroyed in the fires. A recent analysis from Well Fargo Securities estimated that insured losses were at least \$30 billion, with the vast majority of that, some 85 percent, estimated to be claims for home losses. Accuweather estimates that the total cost of the firestorm from damage and economic losses will top \$150 billion, making it the most destructive in US history.

Both the Palisades Fire, currently west of Santa Monica and Brentwood, and the Eaton Fire, north of Pasadena, have yet to be contained. The Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CalFire) estimated that the Palisades Fire has burned nearly 24,000 acres and is only 14 percent contained, while the smaller Eaton Fire has burned over 14,000 acres and is 33 percent contained. The smallest major fire, the Hurst Fire, is currently 95 percent contained.

Some 150,000 people are still under evacuation orders. Many are living with extended family members while others are in public shelters, unable to return home due either to the ongoing danger or the fact that there is nothing left to return to. The National Weather Service (NWS) Los Angeles office warned that the “extreme fire danger will continue through Wednesday.” The agency issued its highest level “Red Flag” warning between Tuesday 4:00 a.m. and 12:00 p.m. Wednesday for parts of Ventura and Los Angeles counties.

The NWS warned that San Fernando, Thousand Oaks, Simi Valley and other residential areas northwest of Los Angeles could experience

wind gusts between 45-75 miles (72-120 km) per hour between that time. NWS Los Angeles wrote, “Warnings are for the extreme of the extreme fire weather scenarios. In other words, this setup is about as bad as it gets. Stay aware of your surroundings. Be prepared to evacuate.”

Over 14,000 firefighters, including contingents from Mexico, Canada and Ukraine, are currently battling the infernos. Of the 14,000 firefighters, roughly 1,000 are incarcerated inmates, who are paid as little as \$5.80 a day plus \$1 per hour when responding to fires.

While many workers, middle class families and even some celebrities have seen their homes and properties go up in smoke in the last week, the wealthiest citizens of Los Angeles have used their fortunes to protect themselves and their assets. Speaking to the *New York Times*, billionaire former Los Angeles mayoral candidate Rick Caruso confirmed he had hired private firefighters to protect Palisades Village, a mall the developer owns. Caruso got his start in property development and speculation with the help of his father, Henry Caruso, a rental car magnate.

“Our property is standing,” Caruso told the paper. “Everything around us is gone. It is like a war zone.” The *Times* observed that Caruso’s properties appeared “largely intact,” while on the other side of the street where houses once stood was now “ash and rubble.”

A spokesperson for a private firefighting company told the *Times* a two-person crew with a small vehicle can cost “\$3,000 a day,” while larger crews of up to 20 go for as much as “\$10,000” a day.

While private firefighters protected shopping malls, Stephanie, a resident of Altadena, told WSWS reporters in an interview this past weekend that many residents have “nothing left.”

She recalled seeing the fire approaching from inside her apartment: “There was an elderly resident, people were evacuated, but I didn’t really hear anything concretely. One woman wanted to stay. All of a sudden the power went out ... then the internet went out. And so, we were left there sort of without services. The management of this building disappeared.”

Stephanie said she was able to call the sheriff to assist her evacuate residents from the apartment building: “I took the elderly person down the stairwell, and we removed what belongings we could. We were like the last, almost residents it felt like of Altadena. We could see the flames encroaching and spreading very quickly, heading westward and south, ember by ember, through the trees.”

“A lot of residents don’t know whether they want to rebuild,” she continued. “What’s left? There’s no infrastructure. ... The local supermarket, there’s only one bus line, everything, the businesses are gone.” She noted that at “my building, if you look out the window, you see nothing but bleak, harsh earth, like a moonscape and rubble of houses. And it is depressing. I don’t know, a lot of people may not want to rebuild.”

Valerie, a lifelong resident of Altadena and student at the University of Southern California, told the WSWS that her family was among the last to evacuate her neighborhood. “We were told to evacuate around like 5:00 a.m. that Wednesday,” she said, adding, “Currently they’re not letting us back in, and we would like to go back to get medication.

“It is already hard in this world, and then knowing that everyone has to start all over, it is really scary. But thankfully there’s a lot of help

around, like at every block there’s donations.”

As of this writing no official cause of the Eaton Fire has been provided. On Monday the *Los Angeles Times* and other outlets reported that four lawsuits had been filed Monday by homeowners in the Altadena area. Each of the lawsuits accuses utility company, Southern California Edison (SCE), of starting the fire by failing to de-energize its power lines over the Eaton Canyon.

Ali Moghaddass, an attorney with Edelson PC, told the *Times* the utility companies “were on notice of the significant wind events that were coming in that week” and “chose not to use all the tools at their disposal.”

Gerald Singleton, a lawyer with Singleton Schreiber who is also suing SCE on behalf of homeowners, concurred with Moghaddass. “Everything we’ve seen points to Edison’s power lines being the cause,” he told the *Times*.

In several interviews published by *Los Angeles Times* on January 12, many residents testified that they saw the fire begin at the base of a transmission tower located in the Eaton Canyon in the early evening. Marcus Errico told the *Times* he spotted the fire as he was pulling into his driveway shortly after 6:00 p.m. last Tuesday.

“At first it didn’t click,” he told the paper. “Then I realized it was a fire, and there was at this point, just a small ring of flames around the base of one of the [electrical] towers.”

This would hardly be the first time a for-profit energy company’s aging and poorly maintained infrastructure would be responsible for starting a fire. In Northern California, Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E) equipment has been linked to nearly 2,000 fires between 2014 and 2018, including the Camp Fire, still currently the deadliest wildfire in California’s history.

The same investigation found that in 2015 SCE equipment was involved in 107 fires. In 2016 SCE reported another 95 fires. A separate investigation from the *Sacramento Bee* found that SCE equipment ignited 347 fires between 2014 and 2017. Equipment maintained by San Diego Gas & Electric, the third major utility company in California, was responsible for 110 fires over that same three-year period.



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