

Workers speak out on devastation from Los Angeles fires

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With the official death toll standing at 25 and expected to rise, the fires which began last week continue to burn across Los Angeles County Wednesday. The damage and economic impact of the firestorm is now projected by Accuweather to reach \$275 billion. This would make it one of the costliest disasters in US history.

“These fast-moving, wind-driven infernos have created one of the costliest wildfire disasters in modern U.S. history,” AccuWeather Chief Meteorologist Jonathan Porter noted Tuesday. “Hurricane-force winds sent flames ripping through neighborhoods filled with multi-million-dollar homes. The devastation left behind is heartbreaking, and the economic toll is staggering.”

The Palisades Fire, the largest of the fires, is now 21 percent contained, and the second largest, the Eaton Fire, has only been 45 percent contained. These two fires are responsible for every confirmed death and the destruction of at least 12,000 structures, mostly homes, but also schools, small businesses and other buildings.

Many across the region of more than 10 million residents have been exposed to the toxic fumes produced by burning homes, cars and various chemicals, which will impact health outcomes on a mass scale for months.

At least 88,000 people remain under mandatory evacuation orders. Few can afford temporary housing due to the illegal price gouging on rentals, leaving them to stay in shelters, which are mostly recreation centers.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a few of the victims of the fire on Wednesday in the Pasadena and Altadena neighborhoods.

Mary Foster’s family lost everything in the fire. Even though her home has been in the family for over 50 years, she noted that their fire insurance had recently been cancelled.

“On January 7, we were notified to evacuate. And we had little to no time to just grab anything. So I just grabbed my kids, and we just left with the clothes on our back. By January 8 we received a picture of our neighborhood on fire. So we tried to come back and when we got through, our house was completely gone.

“We’ve been sleeping in our car, staying in motels. We had to get storage because people were nice enough to give us donations and stuff for our kids and clothes and stuff, but we have nowhere to store it because we only have a little SUV, and we’re a family of seven. Now we’re utilizing Airbnb.

“That was made possible through help from the Red Cross. It’s not money. It’s Airbnb credit. We’re grateful for that. It was \$3,400; it’s not much, but it’s something. It’s enough to at least house us for like two or three weeks. It’s not even a month, because housing is like \$4,500 a month just to rent.”

Elaine and Cal, both retired landscape architects, also lost their house. They told the WSWs they had “spent the last 20 years creating a beautiful home. We did most of the remodeling by ourselves.”

They housed six of their relatives and had to find temporary housing for them all. Luckily their insurance has not been cancelled. As for their neighborhood, “the short term is how are people going to be compensated for this disaster? Altadena is a community like many others which is socially stratified. You have wealthy layers, and then you have a lot of people who are just working class.”

They also spoke about what resources should be provided to wildfire victims. “Everybody should be made whole. When there is an economic crisis, if you look at the housing crisis in 2008, if you look at sort of the beginning of COVID in 2020, there’s trillions of dollars immediately made available to the banks. We

should, regardless of what people's insurance coverage is, they should all be made whole. Everybody should have a chance to rebuild if they'd like to or start out fresh somewhere."

The severity of the inferno in Southern California is caused by the ongoing and accelerating capitalist-induced climate crisis. Even the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has been forced to admit:

The frequency and severity of wildfires, as well as the duration of the fire season, are increasing in many regions of the world. The occurrence of extreme wildfires—i.e., wildfire events that are particularly severe in terms of their size, duration, intensity and impacts—is also on the rise. In Australia, the average wildfire frequency has doubled since 1980. In the forests of the western United States, wildfire severity, i.e., the degree of ecosystem impacts caused by a fire, increased eightfold between 1985 and 2017. The duration of the fire weather season has increased by 27% globally since 1979.

The American oligarchy, on the other hand, embraces the "drill, baby, drill" philosophy of President-elect Donald Trump. His choice for Energy secretary is climate change-denier and fossil fuel executive Chris Wright. He recently claimed that the concern over wildfires was just "hype," rejecting the broadly understood scientific consensus.

For his part, Trump has sought to tie the ongoing debate over the US debt ceiling with federal aid for the LA fires, effectively holding the metropolitan area of 18 million people hostage for political jockeying.

This is in addition to the cuts by Democratic LA Mayor Karen Bass of tens of millions of dollars to the Los Angeles Fire Department, which has crippled the department's ability to fight the current fires.

While posturing about his concern over climate change, President Joe Biden approved more oil drilling permits than Trump did in his first term, setting up even more fossil fuel emissions, greater global warming and thus even more devastating wildfires in the future.

Every administration in the last half century has poured hundreds of billions into wars of imperialist conquest around the world and collectively trillions have been spent to bail out the banks and super rich. The Socialist Equality Party demands instead the implementation of measures to support the victims of the wildfires.

Build emergency shelters, and use eminent domain to requisition unused properties. There are enough vacant housing units in Los Angeles to provide shelter for every evacuee.

Provide full income protection for all affected workers and close non-essential workplaces and schools. UCLA has ignominiously kept the campus open, poisoning students and staff.

Carry out an emergency national response to stop the spreading fires. California must halt the conscription of prisoners who are paid pennies for risking their lives. Instead, firefighters must be well compensated and fully equipped and trained for their tasks. There are over 10,000 firefighters employed by private companies that are members of the National Wildfire Suppression Association. Many of them are currently being used by LA billionaires to protect their properties at the expense of the population.

Fully compensate for all losses by workers, middle class families and small businesses. Instead of bailouts for wealthy bankers and Wall Street traders, hundreds of billions of dollars must be made available to make the impacted population of Los Angeles whole.



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