

Los Angeles fire survivors erupt in anger over slow and inadequate government response

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A town hall meeting in Santa Monica, California, on Sunday escalated into angry exchanges between survivors of the Pacific Palisades fire and an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) official about the 18-month timeline for clearing debris left by the devastating fire.

It is now three weeks since the beginning of the multiple fires which erupted in the Los Angeles area, destroying thousands of homes, businesses and cultural sites. The official death toll is 29, which is likely to rise as more victims are found in the rubble. The vast majority of survivors are struggling with little to no immediate financial aid and can expect to never be made whole. An unknown number have been added to Los Angeles' already sizable homeless population.

The two main options given to the residents at Sunday's meeting were either the US Army Corp of Engineers' free cleanup program or private contractors averaging \$170,000 per property.

"That's too long," "Speed it up" and "Hire more people," Palisades residents shouted during EPA coordinator Tara Fitzgerald's presentation, according to *Newsweek*.

On January 24, President Donald Trump visited Pacific Palisades, the wealthier enclave that has been nearly erased from the map, and met with California Governor Gavin Newsom, Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass and officials of communities impacted by the fires. He called for dismantling the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the main federal agency organizing relief, and called for the states and religious organizations to take care of their own disasters.

Residents are relying heavily on donations and charity to meet their immediate needs. However, limited resources make it difficult to address the community's needs. State Senator Sasha Renée Perez

told LAist, "The biggest need that I'm hearing from my constituents is direct cash aid."

Despite widespread devastation, many residents have found receiving any federal assistance a significant hurdle. While FEMA promised a one-time \$770 payout for disaster survivors, many residents have found it impossible to navigate the application process, such as lacking necessary paperwork to verify their identities. Many have been denied the aid after applying.

This hurdle has left people with no other choice than to turn to crowdfunding platforms. However, crowdfunding has also highlighted inequalities in the disaster recovery, with those with more wealth and connections likely to raise more donations. Crowdfunding efforts connected to wealthier neighborhoods, including Hollywood celebrities who lost their homes, have received more attention and have therefore had more successful fundraising efforts as compared to communities in Altadena and Pasadena that were destroyed by the Eaton fire.

On Saturday, the WSWWS spoke with Kevin Bartholow and his wife Esther Espinoza in Altadena. Their RV was destroyed in the Eaton fire. Until recently they were staying in the shelter at the Pasadena Convention Center, which is scheduled to shut down on January 31. Now they are living in their car with their two dogs. They spoke angrily about FEMA officials denying their claim.

At first they were welcomed at the shelter, but conditions became unbearable for them. Esther said she came down with a sore throat and was placed in an isolation area with many others who had COVID-19 and other illnesses. She said she's been masked and washing her hands and was not sick enough to stay among those people. After three days, she reunited with her husband.

One night at 3:00 a.m., Kevin woke up to officials rifling through their belongings looking for “contraband.” He said they did not have a right to do that. He also described a neighboring woman who was sexually assaulted.

“It’s just weird. It’s unsafe in there, and then to be treated rudely, that’s why we left. The shelter volunteers were very nice to us as they got to know our dogs. They told us privately that they were going to shut down the shelter on January 31. They weren’t supposed to let us know,” said Kevin.

The official disregard for human lives is not an isolated incident of the Los Angeles wildfires. Under capitalism, profit is prioritized over everything else. Not only were the California wildfires completely predictable and preventable, but also a direct result of climate change, which is fueled by the exploitative nature of capitalism. The entire ruling class, both the Democrats and the Republicans, are directly responsible for this disaster.



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