

Wildfire smoke blankets large parts of North America

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The early start of the Canadian wildfire season, and the blanket of smoke that has spread across North America as a result, has highlighted one of the many dangers caused by climate change and the inability of the capitalist system to resolve the global crisis.

More than 33,000 people remain evacuated from their homes, including an estimated 17,000 from the Manitoba First Nations. The official death count remains at two.

According to the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Center, there are currently 208 active fires across the country, concentrated mostly in British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan. The only province without an active wildfire is Nova Scotia. There are currently 114 wildfires considered “out of control,” meaning that they are expected to grow. Only 71 are currently contained with another 23 not contained but also not expected to grow.

The highest concentrations of smoke from these fires on Thursday were in Chicago, Detroit and Toronto. The Air Quality Index (AQI) reached 170 in Chicago and 161 in Detroit, making them the cities with the second and third worst air quality worldwide. Such values are more than triple what is considered “good” air quality by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Throughout the day, the AQI in Toronto rose to 142, becoming the city with the seventh worst air quality globally.

Dangerous amounts of smoke spread further across the Upper Midwest and north central US, including most of Minnesota, western Wisconsin and eastern Nebraska. Over 115 million people across the eastern United States and Canada are under air quality warnings.

AQI is measured as the highest concentration of various toxic gases—including ozone, carbon monoxide,

sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide—and amount of microscopic particulates—designated as PM2.5 and PM10—in the lower atmosphere. Medical research has shown that PM2.5 particles are small enough to get into the lungs and bloodstream and the high concentrations measured in Chicago, Detroit and Toronto can cause bronchitis, asthma, obstructive pulmonary disease, heart disease, and diabetes.

As a result, the EPA recommends that those suffering from such poor air quality “avoid prolonged or heavy exertion” and warns that those with asthma and heart disease watch carefully for symptoms such as coughing, shortness of breath, palpitations, or fatigue. An estimated 7 million people globally die each year as a result of poor air quality.

The millions of workers who live in the impacted regions, however, cannot easily stay indoors. In addition to the hundreds of thousands who work outdoors in construction or agriculture, hundreds of thousands more work in plants and factories lacking proper ventilation.

Nor are workers given adequate protections, including N95 masks or better, to ensure they are not forced to breathe in the smoke and particulates overwhelming their workplaces. A cynical commentator from CBS reporting in New York City merely noted that the smoke is not as bad as it was from the 2023 wildfires.

The lack of health and safety considerations are of the same order that led to the death of autoworker Ronald Adams Sr., who was crushed to death on April 7 when an overhead gantry crane unexpectedly engaged, pinning him and fatally crushing his upper torso. The long-term health and lives of workers are secondary to capitalist private profit.

Moreover, the wildfire season across North America

is only just beginning. The 2024 Canadian wildfire season was among the worst on record, second only to the fires in 2023. If the trend set by this year's fires holds, there is every possibility that the smoke and toxic chemicals covering swaths of the continent will exceed the catastrophic levels from two years ago.

Canada's National Preparedness Level has already reached the highest level: 5. This level includes a "full commitment of national resources," and because "national availability of resources is limited," Canada is calling for international firefighters to assist. In response, 150 firefighters from the United States have been deployed to assist.

The sharp increase in the scale and impact of wildfires in the past several years is the direct result of the ongoing and accelerating ecological crisis caused by climate change. It has been predicted by climate scientists for decades that one of the impacts of global warming will be longer droughts and more severe wildfires. And starting with the sixth United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Earth's increasing temperatures have been definitively linked to wildfires and the associated droughts and heatwaves that exacerbate them.

The situation is only going to be made worse by the chronic underfunding of the fire agencies in the US and Canada. In the past 10 years, the annual firefighting bill in British Columbia alone has come to an average of \$498 million, more than twice what has typically been allocated for wildfire management. In response, the B.C. Wildfire Service has been forced to use its contingency fund to simply maintain operations.

A significant consequence, however, is that wildfire management has shifted more and more to just wildfire suppression. Resources are not properly allocated to wildfire prevention, such as clearing underbrush and preventative burns, and thus the wildfires become bigger, creating a cycle in which local, provincial and national governments are constantly playing catch-up.

The same has been true in the US, where the budget for the US Forest Service has gone down from \$10.8 billion in 2022 to \$9.3 billion in 2024 and an expected \$8.9 billion in 2025.

Moreover, the US agency had 10 percent of its workforce cut, approximately 3,400 employees, as part of the gutting of all federal agencies by the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), formerly headed

by billionaire oligarch Elon Musk. Experts have warned that the layoffs have left critical tasks understaffed, including wildfire mitigation and direct firefighting.

There is also a danger of international firefighters being reluctant to come to the US to assist in its fire season as a result of the Trump administration's ongoing assault on immigrants, including the arrest of 66,463 people, the deportation of 65,682 and nearly 49,000 held in detention centers. In just January, 72 firefighters from Mexico came to Los Angeles to combat the wildfires that devastated that city.

Like all crises, the Canadian wildfires expose the fundamental inability of the capitalist system, bound by the contradictions of the nation-state and the profit motive, to deal with social problems, much less environmental disasters with an international scope. A real solution to fighting fires is a massive infusion of resources to combat fires, funded through the expropriation of oligarchs like Musk, and putting those resources toward an internationally coordinated effort to fight and prevent wildfires.



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