

Los Angeles Times investigation reveals deadly fire response failures

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An investigation by the *Los Angeles Times* into the January 2025 wildfires that swept through large swaths of Los Angeles County—including Altadena and Pacific Palisades—has revealed a critical breakdown in the emergency response.

Automatic vehicle locator data shows that in the early hours of January 8, as the Eaton Fire tore into residential neighborhoods, more than 100 county fire trucks were dispatched elsewhere—over 40 to the Palisades and dozens to East Altadena—while West Altadena, where the majority of the fire’s 31 victims would ultimately perish, was left virtually undefended. Only a single fire truck was deployed west of Lake Avenue, the line the fire crossed at approximately 3:08 a.m.

The fire became one of the most destructive in Los Angeles County history. For the residents of West Altadena, it was not only the flames that proved deadly but the state’s calculated indifference. At least 17 calls to 911 were made from the area before any evacuation orders were issued. None were answered by county fire crews. Trevor Kelley’s mother, Erliene, called 911 twice before dying alone in her home. Victor Shaw, 66, perished while fighting the flames with nothing more than a garden hose.

While East Altadena received dozens of engines and the Palisades area to the south saw a massive deployment, West Altadena—home to many multiethnic working-class families—was effectively abandoned. The area bore the brunt of the death toll, with entire households dying together. The absence of evacuation warnings, the delayed alerts, and the near-total lack of visible firefighting presence for hours confirmed what residents already felt: they were left to fend for themselves.

Survivors describe the night in apocalyptic terms. Sofia Vidal, a local resident, recalled how she and her neighbors tried in vain to hold the flames back with garden hoses. “There were no sirens. No one came,” she said. “The

silence was as terrifying as the fire.”

Los Angeles County Fire Chief Anthony Marrone offered a bureaucratic apology, attributing the catastrophe to “human error.” He cited difficulties in adjusting deployments from the Rose Bowl command center and claimed that other agencies may have responded in the west but were not tracked by county systems.

These remarks are little more than damage control, offered six months too late and only under intense public pressure. Experts consulted by the *Times* confirmed that West Altadena received negligible coverage from battalion and assistant chiefs during the crucial first 12 hours—meaning no coordination, no leadership, no timely alerts and no organized defense as the flames consumed homes and lives.

The Eaton Fire ultimately scorched more than 14,000 acres and destroyed over 9,000 structures. At least 18 people were found dead in the first week; in the following months, the discovery of charred remains in the ruins brought the confirmed death toll to 31.

Most of the victims were in West Altadena, but the devastation spread across the foothills. Property losses, displacement, and trauma cut across neighborhood and class lines. Homeowners and renters, the affluent and the working poor alike, watched everything they owned reduced to ash.

This universal toll does not obscure the political facts revealed by the fire’s trajectory and response. Resources were not allocated based on need but on a hierarchy determined by property value, institutional influence, and political visibility.

Those in wealthier communities may have also lost homes, but they received earlier warnings, stronger response, and access to private mitigation strategies—landscaping services, personalized evacuation plans, even privately contracted firefighting teams. West Altadena had none of these resources. The question of

who lives and who dies remains one of class, and no amount of rhetoric can obscure that reality.

A grassroots group, Altadena Not for Sale, has since emerged to resist predatory developers who are already descending on the ruins. While drawing attention to real issues of displacement and gentrification, the group frames its opposition in the limited language of “disaster capitalism,” a concept popularized by journalist Naomi Klein. But this framing understates the deeper reality. What happened in West Altadena is not merely the result of opportunism following a catastrophe—it was a consequence of how capitalist society organizes itself long before the first spark.

The frustration and despair expressed by West Altadena’s residents are not only understandable—they are justified. But their anger must be connected to an understanding of why such suffering is permitted. It is not enough to blame individual officials or faulty protocols. The horror in Altadena is a result of the social order itself.

It is possible that communication broke down, that some agency fire trucks operated without proper tracking, or that genuine mistakes were made under pressure. But the pattern is unmistakable. The already inadequate resources were not deployed where they were needed—they were deployed where they were valued. And in capitalist America, value is determined not by human life but by wealth and profit.

To accept the Eaton Fire as a “natural disaster” is to accept a lie. The fire itself may have been sparked by natural conditions, although that remains subject to investigation, with profit-gouging utilities potentially sharing the blame, but its deadly consequences were entirely the result of social and political choices. The fire was not an act of God—it was an act of government.

At every level, the capitalist state failed—and not by accident. President Donald Trump gutted environmental regulations during his first term, and little was restored under Joe Biden. California Governor Gavin Newsom’s 2025–26 budget included cuts to critical social services. Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass and the City Council declared a “fiscal emergency,” slashing spending on social infrastructure while preserving corporate incentives and police funding.

Meanwhile, firefighters operated under impossible conditions. Chronic underfunding left the department with hundreds of out-of-service pieces of equipment and a shrinking workforce. The \$17.6 million budget cut to the city’s fire services was paired with a surge in police spending. In the richest state in the country, basic water

access failed. Hydrants ran dry. Communications networks collapsed. Firefighters fought an inferno with obsolete equipment and no backup.

The city’s decaying infrastructure and the fragmentation of emergency services—where different agencies maintain incompatible data systems—reflect a broader disintegration of public services under capitalism. In this vacuum, privatized emergency response services step in—for those who can pay. The rich hire private fire crews, buy defensive landscaping, or retreat to insured second homes. The working class, and large sections of the middle class, are left to burn.

Prison laborers, paid pennies per hour, were deployed on the front lines while their families—often living in the very neighborhoods abandoned by official services—suffered in silence.

These events may appear exceptional, but they are emblematic. The fire did not expose some momentary lapse in an otherwise functional system. It revealed the true face of capitalism: a society in which human life, whether poor or not, has no intrinsic worth. What determines survival is not dignity, not humanity, but financial and political capital. In this system, people become disposable, because capitalism proceeds not on the basis of human values but on the accumulation of profit at any cost.

The devastation in West Altadena could have been greatly reduced, if not prevented. Firefighters could have been properly equipped and stations fully staffed. Neighborhoods could have been designed and maintained with climate change in mind. A rational emergency system, built around need and science, could have evacuated every resident in time.

In the aftermath, the cycle repeats. Fires are followed by land grabs. Deaths are followed by excuses. And the state continues to function not as a protector of the people, but as the guardian of capital.

No one in West Altadena or elsewhere needed to die. The solution is not a matter of tweaking policies or installing better GPS systems. The task posed by the Eaton Fire is not simply to rebuild, but to replace the system that allowed this to happen in the first place.



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