

Massive US heatwave threatens millions as 3 firefighters die battling Colorado wildfire

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A deadly heatwave is engulfing much of the United States, threatening the lives of workers and their families, including millions forced to labor in factories, warehouses, delivery vehicles, fields and other worksites with insufficient or no air conditioning. Around 162 million people across 35 states are under heat alerts, according to NBC News. Temperatures approaching or exceeding 100 degrees Fahrenheit (37.8°C) are forecast across the Great Plains, Midwest, South and Northeast, including major cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Boston, New York and Washington D.C.

The heatwave is unfolding alongside deadly wildfires across the West. This past Saturday, three firefighters were killed while responding to the Knowles Fire in western Colorado: Emily Barker, 38, of Clinton Township, Michigan; Nick Hutcherson, 27, of Glendale, Arizona; and Sydney Watson, 27, of Warrior, Alabama. Two other firefighters were injured and were receiving medical care.

The circumstances of the deaths have not yet been fully established, but they point to the lethal character of the fire conditions gripping the West. AP reported that the firefighters were overcome by flames during a burnover, after fast-moving fires cut off escape routes and forced them to deploy emergency fire shelters. The National Weather Service had warned of “extreme fire behavior” along the Utah-Colorado border, where “rapid fire growth is likely,” and Grand Junction recorded wind gusts of 44 mph on Saturday.

The extreme weather has not been confined to heat and wildfires. In South Dakota, a powerful storm produced a 131-mph wind gust near Holabird on Monday morning, the strongest recorded in the state since record-keeping began in 2003, according to Fox Weather. Footage from Highmore, South Dakota showed homes, farm buildings and a wind farm badly damaged, with turbines ripped apart or left crippled. The same system produced a confirmed tornado in Marshall County and led the Storm Prediction Center of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to issue an enhanced severe thunderstorm risk across the eastern Dakotas and west-central Minnesota

The unfolding US heatwave, like the record-breaking heatwave in Europe, is not fundamentally a natural disaster, but a social crime. Its victims are overwhelmingly workers, the

elderly, the poor, the unhoused and those forced to labor in workplaces, trucks, warehouses, fields and fire zones without adequate protection, while the ruling class treats the mounting death toll as an acceptable cost of production.

Nowhere is this contradiction clearer than in the logistics industry, where the same corporations that refuse to provide safe working conditions for their employees are pouring money into the protection of commodities. In an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site* on Tuesday, a UPS worker was asked about the company’s plans to spend millions of dollars expanding refrigerated delivery services for medical products, even as workers continue to labor in trucks and hubs without adequate cooling.

“If they’re refrigerating products, that’s news to us cause we don’t have refrigeration sites in our hub,” the worker said. “But it doesn’t surprise me at all that UPS cares more about the packages than those that deliver them.”

He added, “They put it into the contract that they’ll put air conditioning into the new cars, knowing full well most of these trucks last 25-plus years. A fan barely does anything, but they call it fair, and this pathetic union agreed it was enough.”

A Stellantis Sterling Heights Assembly worker told the WSWWS, “I don’t have the exact temperature. I know it’s high 90s. It was high 80s at 5:30 a.m.” Asked what it was like working in the plant now, he said, “Like a diamond mine.”

Similar accounts are appearing across social media. On the United States Postal Service (USPS) subreddit, a city carrier wrote Tuesday that the heat index was over 100 degrees and that there was “no bottled water at [the] office,” only restroom sinks and a weak water fountain that could not be used to fill personal bottles. Another carrier wrote that in his 32 years on the job, management had “never provided bottled water or ice,” forcing workers to refill a gallon jug at gas stations while on their routes. A third postal worker reported, “Supervisors at my office are provided with water bottles but, of course, there’s none for carriers or clerks.”

UPS workers have described similar conditions. One driver warned co-workers that “most of the nation is absurdly hot this week” and urged them to stay hydrated. Another worker summed up the company’s priorities bluntly: “Cardboard and

the shareholders are the only things that matter.” Others referred to cool-down breaks that workers must request individually, adding that “almost nobody uses it,” a reflection of the pressure workers face to keep moving regardless of the heat.

These comments follow a series of heat-related deaths among logistics and postal workers. In June 2024, USPS worker Wednesday “Wendy” Johnson, 51, died after working for hours in the back of a mail truck in Fayetteville, North Carolina, on a 95-degree day. OSHA investigated her death as heat-related, and text messages she sent to her family that day reported that the temperature in the back of the truck had reached 102 degrees.

The *World Socialist Web Site* reported last year that heat is the second-leading cause of injury to USPS workers, accounting for 14 percent of all on-the-job injuries in the Postal Service. Between 2015 and 2023, there were 160 reported heat-related injuries among postal workers, while seven USPS workers died due to heat on the job between 2012 and 2023.

The toll has continued. In 2025, Jacob Taylor, 51, a Dallas-area letter carrier, died after collapsing from heat exhaustion on his route, while Dan Workman, 59, died under similar conditions in Grand Junction, Colorado. Both were forced to work in extreme temperatures without basic protections such as air-conditioned vehicles.

These deaths are not accidents. They are the product of speedup, aging vehicles, nonfunctioning cooling systems and the collusion of management with the union apparatuses, which have accepted token measures while workers continue to be sent into lethal conditions.

California, often presented as a model for workplace heat regulation, demonstrates the gulf between formal rules and the reality confronting workers. The state enacted the country’s first outdoor heat standard in 2005, and later enforcement was associated with significant reductions in heat-related deaths among outdoor workers. But these gains are being undermined by rising temperatures, employer refusal to invest in cooling infrastructure and the hollowing out of enforcement. In Southern California’s Inland Empire, where the logistics corridor supports roughly 200,000 jobs, vast warehouses with metal roofs and limited insulation function as “thermal traps,” while delivery vehicle cargo holds routinely climb 20°F to 30°F above outside temperatures during heatwaves.

Even California’s indoor heat standard, which formally covers warehouses, restaurants, laundries, manufacturing and retail, is routinely violated or unenforced. A July 2025 survey of 338 fast-food workers found that 58 percent had been exposed to excessive indoor heat in the previous year, while 48 percent experienced symptoms of heat illness. Among those exposed to excessive heat, 79 percent reported that air conditioning was nonfunctional, turned off or insufficient. Meanwhile, Cal/OSHA, the state agency charged with enforcement, had a 35 percent vacancy rate among field

compliance inspectors at the end of 2025 and only one field inspector for every 101,000 workers.

The immediate heatwave is unfolding alongside the development of El Niño in the tropical Pacific. NOAA has confirmed the formation of El Niño, which is marked by unusually warm surface waters in the equatorial Pacific, and which can intensify global temperatures and disrupt weather patterns. Forecasters have warned that the event could become one of the strongest on record by late fall or early winter, increasing the risk of extreme storms, droughts, floods and wildfires.

But El Niño is not the fundamental cause of the mounting death toll. It is operating on top of a planet already heated by decades of greenhouse gas emissions and capitalist plunder. The climate crisis is not the product of “overpopulation,” nor of science and technology, whose development is essential to human progress. It is the product of the misuse of science and technology by an irrational and obsolete economic order subordinated to private profit.

The Republicans openly repudiate climate science, and increasingly science itself, in the interests of the oil companies, Wall Street and the corporate oligarchy. But the Democrats are no alternative. They pay occasional lip service to the dangers of climate change while presiding over expanded fossil fuel production, endless war, deregulation and the subordination of every aspect of social life to the profit interests of the same ruling class.

Global warming and environmental destruction lay bare the irreconcilable conflict between capitalism and the survival of humanity. There can be no serious response to climate change within the framework of capitalism, which divides the world into rival nation-states and subjects every decision to the profit motive.

What is required is the socialist reorganization of the world economy on an international scale. Production, transportation, energy, agriculture and public infrastructure must be planned rationally and scientifically, not to enrich shareholders, but to protect human life and meet social need. Only on this basis can the greenhouse gas reductions, workplace protections and emergency infrastructure necessary to prevent catastrophe be carried out.



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