Europe’s “firewave” and global capitalism’s climate crisis

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French authorities are actively considering the evacuation of Bordeaux, with a population of over 250,000 and a metropolitan area inhabited by 850,000 people. Home to some of the most prestigious vineyards in the world, it has stood for more than 2,000 years and over a third of the city is a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site.

All of which is now covered in thick smoke, produced by a wildfire which has already burned through a record area of land and forced the evacuation of 200,000 people in its path—bringing the total number of people displaced by fires across Europe to 400,000. The heat and haze are now generating their own thunderstorms, bringing lightning strikes which can worsen the blaze.

That this can be happening in one of the 10 richest countries in the world, in the continent with the highest levels of per capita social spending, is an unanswerable indictment of capitalism.

Government negligence and underfunding have allowed the fires to grow in poorly managed forests and undermined attempts to contain them. A spokesperson for the National Firefighters Federation of France, whose members are risking their lives daily to contain the inferno, told reporters bluntly, “It’s a David-versus-Goliath scenario.” Personnel and equipment are so scarce that European officials have warned fires may be burning into November.

Workers must demand and fight for the resources needed to mount an urgent and massive response to the crisis and improve the continent’s readiness for the future. But to carry out such measures without also tackling the social system producing these disasters is like firefighting on the slopes of a volcano.

Economic and social life is so mismanaged, so dominated by the profit interests of an obscenely rich few, that a damaged climate is endangering millions even in the most technologically developed parts of the globe. More fires are burning in Spain, Italy, Greece and the UK, as well as other areas of France, threatening areas close to Madrid, Valencia and Paris. Only weeks ago, North America was blanketed in toxic wildfire smoke.

Scientists at Imperial College London have been moved to coin the term “firewave,” described by Professor of Fire Science Guillermo Rein as “the wildfire equivalent of a heatwave: a period of exceptionally high wildfire activity that overwhelms the emergency response of a city, region or nation.”

These events have been made far more likely and severe by the raising of the Earth’s average temperature through fossil fuel emissions. They are the product of prolonged and record heat waves—Britain is now entering its fourth this year—and worsening drought.

Besides contributing to the wildfires, these conditions have already killed well over 10,000 people across the continent—as many as 25,000 according to an estimate from Indiana University—and injured an estimated 277,000 workers. They have caused billions of euros of economic damage, especially to agriculture.

Scientists have warned for decades about Europe’s exposure to these dangers. But a ruling class which already proved its indifference to human suffering during the Covid pandemic did nothing to prevent them.

As far as the oligarchy is concerned, this is simply the cost of doing business—paid by other people through their lives, health and taxes. What are a few tens of thousands of deaths in June, possibly the city of Bordeaux in July, and who knows what else in August, against the billions to be made disregarding the costs of climate change?

For the world working class, this is a grave warning and must be a spur to action. Today’s environmental disasters are taking place with the Earth only on the threshold of breaching 1.5 degrees Celsius global heating above the pre-industrial average. Most authoritative forecasts warn of the world’s capitalist governments taking the planet to close to double this (2.8C) by 2100.

The consequences—not only extreme heat and drought but flooding and storms—worsen exponentially with each tenth of a degree.

As the authors of these studies warn, the impact will fall hardest on exposed poorer countries in Africa and South

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Asia. Imperialism denied these countries any opportunity to lay the foundations of a modern, sustainable economy and now lumbers them with the worst outcomes of fossil fuels' rampant overuse by the super-rich.

Just this week, Uganda began emergency food handouts after 19 people were reported dead by starvation, amid a prolonged drought which has placed 1.5 million people at risk.

Extreme weather connected with the El Niño weather pattern is predicted by Goldman Sachs analysts to produce a nearly 16 percent surge in global commodity food prices into 2028. An investment bank provides this information because, under capitalism, those with influence are more concerned about the impact on their stock trades than on human lives.

Meanwhile, the United Nations' World Food Programme and Food and Agriculture Organization are reduced to begging governments for $202 million for minimal measures to protect 8.8 million people across 22 high-risk countries. Less than a fifth has been received.

The consequences of climate change are bound up with all the morbid symptoms of capitalism in its death agony.

Environmental disasters produced by climate change are fuelled by emissions from economies churning out armaments and storing up the energies of the next financial explosion. The consequences—poverty and war—leave vast swathes of humanity especially vulnerable to droughts, heat waves, floods, storms and the wider spread of viruses.

At the same time, environmental crises intensify the military scramble for resources and slash workers' incomes. A recent report on 6-10 percent annual wage losses for India's agricultural, construction and transport workers due to 2024's extreme heat described it as a "poverty multiplier."

The current epicentre of these mutually reinforcing disasters is the Horn of Africa, home to 140 million people—a figure expected to double by 2050. It is impacted by drought and other forms of extreme weather, the fertiliser crisis caused by the US war on Iran, and the destruction and displacement brought by major local conflicts. Close to 40 million people are threatened with acute food insecurity, including nearly 5 million children with acute malnutrition.

Never before has a social system been so destructive as to put the most basic condition of civilisation, the global natural environment itself, at risk—not only from the acute catastrophe of nuclear war, but the chronic disaster of global warming and environmental collapse.

Like war, the climate crisis is one of the defining issues of our time, which the international working class must either suffer or solve. It is not, as right-wing politicians and their many media sounding chambers claim, a "lifestyle" question of interest only to the affluent middle class, but a life-or-death question for every worker. It is not, as the green movement claims, a question of personal responsibility, but of collective class struggle.

And it is an unavoidably revolutionary question.

In June, the World Inequality Lab released a "Global Justice Report." Based on a large collection of natural scientific, economic and social studies, it demonstrates the material possibility of providing a vastly higher standard of life for the overwhelming majority of the population while limiting global heating to 2C by 2100 and investing in adaptation measures to deal with the consequences.

However, the authors propose to do so with global wealth taxes up to 20 percent and global income taxes up to 90 percent. This only serves to prove the uselessness of all such reformist pipe dreams.

The oligarchy to which these taxes would apply will not relinquish a single cent. Its multi-millionaire and billionaire members are proving in America and beyond that they would rather see a dictatorship than a depreciation of their assets. Donald Trump, trampling on democracy and encouraging an orgy of fossil fuel extraction, is the foul individual embodiment of this class reality.

The social wealth monopolised by the super-rich, and with it the power to direct the fate of humanity, must be expropriated through the struggle of the working class. Only through democratic, scientifically informed planning can a situation in which society has enough productive power to drastically alter the climate of the planet, but apparently not to feed and protect all its citizens, be ended.

This is the perspective of world socialist revolution which must be taken up by the workers of Europe now being burned out of their homes and of the whole world threatened with the results of capitalism's climate crisis.

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