

“I just have been in a fog since the incident”

Two years since the Camp Fire destroyed the town of Paradise, California

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The year 2020 saw the largest and most destructive wildfire season on record in California and across the western US. Extreme heat conditions combined with dry vegetation to spark 9,279 fires, obliterating over four million acres of land and claiming 33 lives in California alone. Hundreds of thousands were displaced in the midst of the deadly coronavirus pandemic, and many will remain without permanent shelter for years to come.

This same scenario has replayed itself many times over the past few years, leaving wildfire victims with little more than the traumatic memories of the tragic loss of homes or family members. Survivors continue to face a possible repeat disaster, as the rebuilding process is constantly threatened by looming wildfires.

Two years ago, the November 2018 tragedy known as the Camp Fire, which virtually destroyed all of the city of Paradise, was responsible for the death of 85 residents. It destroyed almost 19,000 structures, including 14,000 homes. The fire was the costliest natural disaster in the world that year, with damages estimated to be upwards of \$16 billion.

However, while environmental conditions, such as strong winds and low humidity, factored into the severity of the disaster, the event was largely due to negligence by Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E), the utility company which provides electricity to northern California.

The tragedy in Paradise began when a faulty electric transmission line sparked a fire which intensified as strong winds helped fuel the flames, leading to what is now considered to be the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in California history.

The ensuing 24 hours would be ones of fear and panic, as residents gathered what possessions they could and attempted to flee the town. By Friday morning, the town of Paradise had burned to the ground. Although officials issued a citywide order for residents to evacuate, many did not receive the order with sufficient notice, and some never received the order at all. In fact, emergency officials relied on a privately-run emergency alert program that only notified residents who had signed up for it, around 30 percent of residents.

Another obstacle for fleeing residents was the inadequate number of lanes in three of the four evacuation routes from the town. One road was already closed due to the fire by the time the evacuation order had been issued. The other, the Skyway, was the only road with more than two lanes. Even at that, the Skyway was designed to carry only 1,200 cars per hour. Many had to flee on foot from their cars to escape the quickly approaching flames, while others became trapped by a wall of flames and perished in their vehicles.

In its wake, the Camp Fire left tens of thousands of residents without homes and jobs, and forced them to begin the long, painful process of rebuilding in the two years that have since followed. Making recovery all the more difficult is the stark fact that residents of Paradise were older and poorer compared to the rest of the state, with a median age of 50, and a median household income of roughly \$47,500, nearly 30 percent lower than the state as a whole.

A website devoted to the survivors of the Camp Fire, campfiresurvivors.com, highlights numerous stories from the former residents of Paradise and Butte County. Their accounts are both harrowing and heartbreaking.

Howard, who lives barely four miles from where the fire started, called several of his friends in the nearby community of Concow to warn them of the approaching fire. The fire continued to surround his home on three sides over the next two weeks. At one point, he was awoken by Cal Fire officials telling him to evacuate. He grabbed his three kittens and attempted to borrow a friend's truck to retrieve more of his possessions. Howard was fortunate to have his home spared in the end, but not before the fire came within 500 feet of his property line. He explained that he felt “lucky” to still have his home, mainly due to a rainstorm that passed through on November 22, although many of his friends were not as fortunate.

Marius, a worker at Paradise Post Acute nursing home, detailed the story of how he, his girlfriend, and her son, narrowly escaped the fire, getting stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic on the Skyway, and looking for places to shelter. He explained the disastrous impact of the fire on his life, “Just as I

was trying to rebuild my life again from having almost lost everything ... I just had it all set up for just having that moment of clarity and making better choices to make it a better future and to be a good father and to be a good husband. All just wiped out and now back at square one!!!

“No one knew, and no one thought everything that everyone had ... would be gone forever,” Marius noted. “I didn’t care about items I had or cloths [sic], all the material things would be replaced eventually, but there were things that I and many people have lost that simply cannot and will not ever be replaced. Family pictures and the very sentimental things that could never be priced or even redone in any way.”

Among the many accounts and updates which are still coming into campfiresurvivors.com is an entry from an anonymous former resident titled, “I WANT TO GO HOME”:

I left Chico 6 months ago. We couldn’t take living like we were. I am so lost now. I feel totally disconnected from my community (Paradise) I grew up in. I just have been in a fog since the incident. Can’t even type the word f*re. I feel like I am so late to the mental recovery process. So lost. So alone.

I didn’t think it was going to be this difficult

- hiring a lawyer because my insurance company
- making that damn list for PG&E lawsuit
- on and on and on and on

As you all know.

I miss you all, I miss the beauty, I miss running down the roads

I miss feeling safe

I miss my dog

Lost.

Facebook groups of Camp Fire survivors detail how many are still struggling. One woman and her family were staying at a friend’s place only to find that he was a violent person. She and her fiancé have exhausted their savings trying to leave. Another woman and single mother of two, out of work due to the pandemic, is relying on the kindness of strangers to donate gifts to her daughters for Christmas. She was hoping to have received a payment from PG&E by now, but the money has not come through.

Another page details where many of the survivors of the Camp Fire have relocated. While many of them continue to live in California or on the West Coast, many more left, choosing to settle in the Midwest and East Coast, and further still, with some transplanting to Hawaii and Alaska.

In June, PG&E pleaded guilty to 84 counts of felony involuntary manslaughter and one felony count of unlawfully causing a fire. The Camp Fire was just one of numerous incidents in which the utility’s old, faulty equipment was

responsible for a deadly and destructive fire.

However, the ruling at best amounted to a slap on the wrist, without any executives being charged or imprisoned. The settlement outlines that PG&E is to pay out a maximum fine of \$3.5 million, or \$41,667 for each Camp Fire victim, although claims filed by victims surged past \$30 billion. They will also be responsible for reimbursing the state \$500,000 for the cost of the investigation, for a total of \$4 million, just one-fourth of the \$16 million bonus package PG&E executives planned on awarding themselves in early 2019.

Adding insult to injury, in September 2018, then Governor Jerry Brown signed into law SB 901, effectively limiting damages for which utility companies are liable, and taking into account such considerations as weather severity, as well as the company’s “financial status” to the costs to shareholders.

Rather than put forth a comprehensive plan to prevent a repeat of the Camp Fire disaster, the capitalist system and the entire political establishment, composed of both Republicans and Democrats, offer no real solutions to tackle climate change and the vast danger it poses to humanity. Earlier this year, California Governor Gavin Newsom initially proposed a \$12 billion “climate budget” that would, in part, allocate funding for the prevention and response to the state’s wildfire crisis. Those plans were mostly scrapped in May, in order to balance the gaping \$54.3 billion deficit left in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

After last month’s election, political pundits have lauded President-elect Joe Biden as the answer to reverse all of President Trump’s disastrous policies, especially those pertaining to climate change. Biden has said he will take on the climate catastrophe head on with his proposed \$2 trillion climate plan, which his website claims will seek to drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions and push for the widescale use of clean energy.

In reality, Biden is an establishment Democrat whose cabinet picks already exemplify his support for corporate interests, having hired and nominated individuals with ties to both big pharma and the fossil fuel industry.

Ultimately, the climate catastrophe and the malign neglect of utility companies will continue unabated as the political establishment continues to push forward feeble policies that do not address the core of the problem, leaving the capitalist system untouched. Without a united working class movement based on a genuine socialist program, where enacting solutions based on science without regard for national divisions would be a reality, similar tragedies to that of Paradise will be repeated—leaving many more displaced and broken.



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