

The Los Angeles fire disaster and the necessity of socialist planning

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The multiple fires currently raging out of control in Los Angeles, California represent a catastrophe of staggering proportions. Communities, the size of small cities in themselves, have been erased from the map as numerous separate fires, accelerated by high winds and dry conditions, have rapidly overwhelmed what inadequate or nonexistent countermeasures were in place.

Los Angeles, the seat of the American entertainment industry, is a city known for creating illusions. But in just a matter of days, many of those illusions went up in flames, revealing the absolutely barbarous state of social relations in contemporary America and the total inability of capitalism to confront any social problem: from climate change to urban planning to basic water management. Like the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which inspired Voltaire's *Candide*, the Los Angeles fires will have far-reaching effects on popular consciousness.

Firefighters—a third of whom are estimated to be unfree convict laborers making as little as between 16 and 74 cents per hour—continue to risk their health and lives to fight the flames, but their efforts have been handicapped by insufficient numbers and lack of water pressure in the hydrants.

Approximately 179,000 residents have been ordered to evacuate their homes so far, with scarce places for them to shelter. Five deaths have been confirmed, but many more victims remain to be discovered among the ashes. Countless families have lost pets, household belongings and cherished keepsakes. Millions will be exposed to the toxic pall of smoke that is descending over the area, with incalculable health consequences for years to come.

The worst of the fires broke out Tuesday. The Palisades Fire rapidly consumed more than 17,200 acres and counting, including virtually the entire coastal Pacific Palisades neighborhood, which had a population of over 23,000. The Eaton Fire has consumed 10,600 acres, including much of the community of Altadena. The Hurst

fire in the enclave of San Fernando consumed 671 acres.

On Wednesday, two more fires broke out: the Lidia Fire, which consumed 348 acres, and the Sunset Fire, which consumed 43. On Thursday, the Kenneth Fire began, rapidly spreading to 960 acres. Both the massive Palisades and Eaton fires are zero percent contained as of this writing. None of the other separate fires are fully contained and the number of acres they cover is constantly changing. While termed “wildfires” in some reports, the flames have reached deep into urban areas, destroying historic buildings, schools, monuments and churches alongside whole residential neighborhoods.

This unfolding catastrophe is not merely a “natural” disaster, but the inevitable product of capitalism; or the subordination of all social needs to fueling the imperialist war machine together with financial returns for Wall Street—war and profits above guaranteeing basic safety for the population, war and profits above rational urban planning, war and profits above everything.

Los Angeles, a metropolitan area home to more than 18 million people, is one of the world's foremost cities, including in terms of its role in production and exchange, the many languages and global connections of its labor force, and the influence of its cultural output. The advisory firm Oxford Economics ranked Los Angeles seventh out of the world's top 1,000 “global cities,” and the China Development Institute ranked the city eighth in the world as a financial center. That predictable and preventable fires are raging out of control in such a city is an indictment of the entire global economic and social system.

Climate change, itself a product of unchecked capitalist exploitation of the environment, undoubtedly played a role in the Los Angeles fires. Longer dry seasons in Southern California have not only aggravated the fire danger but reduced available water supplies and complicated efforts to develop countermeasures. One

recent study found that human-caused climate change resulted in a 320 percent increase in burned areas in California from 1996 to 2021.

The entire political establishment is responsible for the catastrophe. The inadequate fire department budgets, the insufficient water supplies, the anarchic and unsafe construction practices—all these are the direct responsibility of the Democratic Party, which has held Los Angeles tightly in its grasp for decades. In Democratic mayor Karen Bass's latest budget proposal, funding for the fire department was cut by \$17.6 million, while the Los Angeles Police Department received a \$126 million increase to its budget, now at \$2.14 billion.

More profoundly, Los Angeles in particular suffers from what can only be described as the opposite of rational urban planning. For decades, the city sprawled haphazardly in whichever direction was dictated by short-term profit interests. This process has produced a massive concrete metropolis that grinds entirely to a halt at rush hour every morning and evening due to inadequate transportation infrastructure.

Concentrated in areas like the infamous Skid Row and in rows of tents pitched alongside the streets, an unhoused population, so large it can only be estimated in the tens of thousands, looks up every day at hills ringed with mansions shamelessly constructed by the wealthy, many of which sit empty for much of the year. Taxes, as well as the price of housing, health care and basic necessities, are notoriously astronomical.

It is noteworthy that the Getty Villa museum was evidently and thankfully spared as the Palisades Fire swept through the area. The measures implemented by the museum include on-site water storage, regular brush clearing efforts, double-walled construction and state-of-the-art insulation techniques. One cannot reproach the museum for going to extraordinary lengths to protect its irreplaceable collection of ancient Greek and Roman artifacts. But one must ask: If such measures are available, why were they not taken for every other home and workplace in the city?

Indeed, if Los Angeles had put the wealth concentrated in its boundaries to rational use, not a single structure would have burned and not a single person would have died; because the resources would instead have been allocated to prevent a hazardous fire from breaking out in the first place, to mitigate the risk with overlapping layers of countermeasures and to respond decisively in the event of heightened danger.

In the year 2025, the resources and scientific knowledge

exist everywhere to prevent much of the harm resulting from fires, floods, tornadoes, earthquakes and outbreaks of disease like COVID-19. However, such “natural” disasters are able to devastate a society which instead funnels all of its resources into limitless military budgets and into the pockets of grotesquely rich oligarchs like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos.

The Republicans represent the interests of that oligarchy no less than the Democrats. The incoming Trump administration, in particular, amounts to inviting a gang of arsonists to run a fire department. Trump's environmental policies, which include completely removing all restrictions on corporate plunder, epitomize the domination of the interests of the oligarchy over the social needs of the working class as well as over future life on the planet.

Climate change, together with preventable diseases and foreseeable urban disasters, are global issues requiring a global solution: a socialist program of rational planning, democratic oversight of production, and international coordination to halt and reverse all necessary trends, which includes the administration of all cities such that the health, safety, needs and aspirations of the entire working-class population are paramount.

While Los Angeles is currently choking on toxic smoke, it has the potential to be a grand and beautiful place. With socialist planning combined with its year-round sunshine and spectacular sunsets over the Pacific Ocean, it could truly be a paradise on earth for all of its residents, not just for a wealthy few.

At the same time, the issues raised by the Los Angeles fires are universal issues. All the fundamental problems confronting society are mass problems, requiring the allocation of enormous resources in a rational and planned way, on the basis of social need.

The technology and productive power already exists. What is lacking only is the organization of the working class under a socialist leadership capable of unleashing its tremendous progressive and revolutionary potential throughout the world.



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