

“Capitalism is a death cult. I hope this is the moment that radicalizes people.”

Los Angeles residents speak out on ongoing fire catastrophe

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The ongoing fires in Los Angeles have burned down more than 12,000 homes, churches, schools, libraries, a synagogue, small stores, banks restaurants and local landmarks. The official death tally stands at 11, a number expected to rise as the search continues for those who were unable to escape the blazes.

The fires, which began on Tuesday, have burned more than 56 square miles in Los Angeles County, making it by far the largest ever fire disaster in a major US urban region. An estimated 153,000 people are under an evacuation order and another 166,800 face evacuation warnings. No count has been made of the tens of thousands of homeless in LA displaced or killed by the fires.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to numerous workers and residents in the city, on the direct impact of the fire, as well as the connected social and political issues. We ask all our readers in the Los Angeles area to write into us here or comment below about their experiences with the fires this week.

Trina Wagner, an Albertsons worker for 25 years, spoke on the frantic moments of her evacuation, for which there was little to no warning. She and her son were renting a room in Pacific Palisades. But now they are homeless as the landlord himself has now lost his home to the Palisades Fire.

“We were at the beach, and the wind was like 88 miles (141 km) an hour. The sand got in my eye and then the smoke, which meant I couldn’t see. We just had to get out of there. I wanted to stay to go to the house, but it got so bad that we, my son and I, just had to go forward. We had to keep driving forward.

“And the people that own homes nearby, the last I had talked to them, they got evacuated too. And from what the neighbors told them, they lost their homes. The people on the left side lost their home. So now they’re out of a house, and I’m out of a home. I work for Albertsons, and I’m going to take some time off because I lost all my clothes, even my badge.

“What we saw I never want to see again. I saw Gladstone’s Restaurant burn. I saw the trailer park burn. I saw the bathrooms at the beach burn. The lifeguard chairs, where they sit, the blue ones, are gone. It’s just unbelievable.”

Trina also commented on watching firefighters attempting to contain the blazes. “I watched them. There was no water in the hydrants. Yeah, they were trying to get it out and nothing. It was dry. It was awful.

“When I first heard the first fire truck go by, it took at least another

half hour before I heard another one. And then maybe half hour after that, another one. And then after these got really out of control, then they started coming. Everything got frantic, and that’s when I’m like, this is serious. Because the ashes were coming down.”

Gianbattista Vinzoni, a chef and small business owner in Pacific Palisades, spoke on the broader social issues, especially the lack of resources allocated to fighting fires.

“I almost feel guilty saying that we had no damage. I managed to get home today, and I saw my building. And from Las Lomas to Muskingham, everything is closed because there’s a building that is collapsing, and I thought it was ours. However, ours is completely intact. Firefighters came from behind the backyard, and they broke down the gate to put out the fire from the house behind us that was entering our garden.

“Also, my deli shop was spared, as it’s in a cement structure. So much devastation, so much destruction that you feel guilty that nothing happened to you.

“This was a truly special event. Every year, normal Santa Ana conditions would produce winds of 30-40 miles per hour. This year, winds were blowing at 100 mph (160 kmph) in Pacific Palisades. This never happened before. I’ve talked to people who were born in Palisades and are in their 60s, and they said they’ve never seen anything like this.

“Is it difficult to fight a fire with such wind? Sure, but the fact that the city of Los Angeles did not have enough pressure in the fire hydrants is a shocking thing. It is an unacceptable thing. They are all accomplices. Everyone. It’s like if I go into the kitchen, make pizza and don’t turn on the wood-fired oven. Criminal, absolutely.”

When asked about the enormous resources allocated to wars, compared to the paltry amounts dedicated to fighting fires, he declared, “I absolutely agree with you, absolutely 100 percent agree that we cannot lose sight of the various Elon Musks, the various Tom Cruises, all the celebrities. If everyone donated \$100 million, \$10 million, which is nothing to them, do you know how many air tankers they could buy?

“Then there is the climate change part, absolutely. I’ve always said that the only thing we can do is respect our planet, that is the first thing. We must support people who risk their lives to save our assets, that is, they risk their lives to go and fight an event like this with an axe and a shovel. It’s like if we didn’t buy ambulances for hospitals. Climatic conditions were the ones that caused the disaster.”

When asked about Democratic Mayor Karen Bass's proposal to slash another \$49 million from the Los Angeles Fire Department, Vinzoni's wife exclaimed, "She's an a**hole."

Vinzoni continued, "If there's no money ... you don't have the firefighters, you don't have the equipment, you don't have your own back.

"The climate problem is an international one, but as long as we have people who exploit it, starting from oil and fossil fuel, there will always be fires. Sixty years ago the heat could hit 120 ° (49 °) once; now every summer we hit record temperatures. You drive a car at 170 miles per hour, and you don't stop for a week, the engine melts. The planet is breaking down.

"We have to have respect for this planet, to have respect for where we live. That is, when you go home, you take off your shoes; when you finish eating, you clean your plate; you do things properly. The planet is in our home. We treat it like the last toilet in the stadium.

"The recent election is the umpteenth election where people voted for one, not because they supported him but to not vote for the other. Harris showed up after three and a half years, she hasn't even seen you. What have you done for me?

"And Trump pisses me off. He didn't do anything for me either, four years that he was at the top. He just helped his buddies, those who were super rich. A small business, a small person doesn't count.

"California is the 5th largest economy in the world. We have people dying of hunger. Imagine, we don't have firefighters! You understand? So much money in California. And we don't have sufficient pressure in the fire hydrants!"

Will Cooper, a resident in San Diego, noted the potential dangers posed by fires in that city.

"In San Diego, we have experienced, as of now, no problems resulting from the fires up north. That could change if the winds end up carrying smoke our way. We check the air quality index daily. If our air should turn toxic, we'll close all the windows and run our air purifiers.

"As you probably know, San Diego County has had its share of devastating wildfires. Part of the problem in fighting them stems from a lack of an adequate number of reservoirs to retain the meagre amount of rain that falls in the region. Most of it runs into the ocean.

"Billions of gallons have been deliberately released because the dams are substandard. The authorities think they're too unsafe to fill the reservoirs to capacity. Adding that to current drought conditions results in water shortages at critical times, such as is happening now in LA.

"Clearly, water management statewide needs major reform."

Leila Charles Leigh, a Los Angeles resident, spoke on the broader political issues surrounding the fires, including the state of American capitalism, the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and the expanding wars in the Middle East and elsewhere.

"I'm sad and furious and also under-slept from following all the evacuation alerts as they come in throughout the night.

"We have been enormously lucky to be out of the path of the fires for the moment, but the scenes of destruction are horrifying, and the devastation was preventable.

"The fall of the US empire is progressing much more quickly than I

had anticipated, even at my most pessimistic. We just had a presidential election with no real discussion of addressing climate change or healthcare. The people committing genocide in Gaza, while killing over a million of their own citizens by letting COVID rip, are perfectly comfortable with mass death.

"There are so many villains to blame for our current state of affairs, starting with the big oil companies, who have known for almost 50 years that their practices would lead us directly to this point.

"Then come the politicians who do their bidding, the city budgets that spend wildly on cops while defunding every other budget that involves community care, including the [Los Angeles] Fire Department. The billionaire Resnick family (whose Wonderful Company produces pistachios and pomegranate juice) has stolen from California's water supply.

"The mayor, the governor, the president, the CDC, who have all stigmatized masks in their scheme to pretend COVID is over and to get everyone back to work, are now relying on mutual aid organizations to bring them high quality masks. As if we haven't still needed supplies of N95s this whole time.

"Thousands of people are getting a crash course in just how close we all are to being homeless climate refugees. We live in a country that has criminalized poverty in thousands of ways, an incredibly lucrative prison system, and a state that relies on prisoners to fight fires for pennies. When she was California's Attorney General, Kamala Harris notoriously refused to release prisoners who could have been paroled because she insisted we needed their (basically) slave labor to fight wildfires.

"Billionaires have been given free rein to exploit labor and steal all our resources. So this is where we are. Mutual aid groups are stepping in to do the work of a government that only functions to transfer wealth to the top 0.1 percent while waging wars around the world.

"Climate change won't spare the wealthy, even if they've deluded themselves into thinking it's only a problem for poor people and the global South, and somehow, in their grotesque cruelty, were able to make peace with that assumption.

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