

The Los Angeles fires: What must be done

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party
11 January 2025

The ongoing fires that have swept through Los Angeles over the past week are a catastrophe of monumental proportions.

The Eaton Fire (affecting Altadena and Pasadena) is at this point only 3 percent contained, while the Palisades Fire is only 8 percent contained. Additional high winds are forecast for the coming days, threatening to worsen the devastation.

As of this writing, 10 people are confirmed dead, but this number is expected to rise dramatically. Los Angeles County Fire Chief Anthony Marrone has warned that up to 10,000 structures may need to be searched for human remains. More than 9,000 structures have been damaged or destroyed, and 180,000 residents remain under mandatory evacuation orders. More than 200,000 people have lost power. The fires have left countless workers unable to work across various industries.

Toxic smoke blankets the region, affecting 17 million people, including tens of thousands of homeless individuals with no protection from the hazardous air. Carlos Gould, an environmental health scientist at the University of California San Diego, told Reuters, “The levels of wildfire smoke we’ve seen in LA these past few days imply between a 5—15 percent increase in daily mortality.”

As with every major disaster, the fires starkly expose the class divisions in society. The same callous indifference that defined the ruling class’s response to Hurricane Katrina two decades ago, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and countless other crises is once again on display.

At the local and state levels, the Democratic Party, which controls California politics, bears direct responsibility for the disaster. Leaked documents reveal that Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass recently proposed an additional \$49 million in cuts to the fire department, compounding \$17.6 million slashed in the previous budget. A significant portion of firefighting labor is performed by prisoners, who are paid pennies per hour to risk their lives in conditions akin to modern-day slavery.

At the federal level, the Biden administration has offered minimal assistance. The White House has pledged to pay for the costs of the emergency response to the fires, but this would only cover expenses such as removing debris, setting

up temporary shelters and paying first responders. It would do nothing to address the massive damage the fires have caused, which is currently estimated at \$150 billion.

When Wall Street faces a crisis, trillions are swiftly allocated for bank bailouts. Yet when working class and middle class families endure disasters, they are left to fend for themselves or face exploitation by insurers and financial institutions.

None but the wealthiest, who have access to the best attorneys, will receive full compensation, while working people, if they have insurance coverage at all, will face an endless Kafkaesque process to get assistance. Already, many have turned to social media in a desperate effort to raise funds.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that one principle—human need—must in all circumstances take precedence over the wealth and profits of the super-rich. The following measures must be implemented immediately:

Build emergency shelters, and use eminent domain to requisition unused properties

Emergency shelters must be established to house the 180,000 residents under mandatory evacuation orders and all homeless people. Eminent domain, the power of the government to take private property for public use, often used to displace working class families for corporate projects, must be redirected to prioritize social needs.

According to a 2020 report by the ACCE Institute, Los Angeles has over 93,000 vacant housing units, nearly half deliberately withheld from the market. Thousands of luxury apartments remain empty, owned as second homes or speculative investments, while corporate entities hold over 22 square miles of vacant lots for profit.

Provide full income protection for all affected workers, and close non-essential workplaces and schools

All workers impacted by the Los Angeles fires must receive full income protection for lost wages. Non-essential workplaces and in-person educational facilities in affected areas must be closed immediately until it is safe to return. This includes institutions like UCLA, which has outrageously kept its campus open despite toxic air quality and evacuation orders, provoking widespread opposition

from students and educators. All workers, regardless of employment or immigration status, must be fully compensated for lost wages during closures.

Carry out an emergency national response to stop the spreading fires

The wildfires expose the chronic underfunding of critical services, particularly firefighting. Despite decades of warnings about the escalating threat of wildfires, local agencies remain unprepared to combat disasters of this scale. There must be a massive mobilization of resources throughout the state and across the country to combat the fires.

Fully compensate for all losses by workers, middle class families and small businesses

The massive costs of recovery must not be offloaded onto the backs of ordinary people. A significant obstacle to recovery is the predatory role of the insurance industry. Following the Northern California fires of 2018, insurance companies dramatically increased premiums, effectively pricing many families out of neighborhoods they had lived in for decades. Tens of thousands were cut off from insurance altogether.

All workers and small businesses impacted by the Los Angeles fires must receive full compensation for their losses, covering immediate damages and the long-term costs of rebuilding lives and livelihoods. No one should bear out-of-pocket expenses.

Additionally, HEPA air filters, high-quality N95 masks and other protective equipment must be immediately distributed to all homes and workplaces in areas affected by wildfire smoke. Providing free air filtration systems would not only mitigate the immediate health effects of wildfire smoke but also offer significant benefits in slowing the spread of COVID-19 and other airborne pathogens.

The fight for these demands must be brought into every workplace, neighborhood and community affected by the fires and beyond. Rank-and-file workplace and neighborhood committees, independent of the capitalist politicians and corporatist apparatus of the trade unions, must be formed to unify workers, students and residents in a collective struggle to fight for their needs.

Workers must reject the claim that there is no money to take these necessary and urgent measures. The vast resources concentrated in the hands of billionaires must be confiscated and redirected toward addressing the needs of those affected by the fires.

The Los Angeles metropolitan area is home to 53 billionaires, whose combined wealth totals \$222 billion. Among the wealthiest individuals in Los Angeles are Eric Smidt (\$15.6 billion), founder of Harbor Freight Tools; Peter

Thiel (\$9.2 billion), co-founder of PayPal and a major force behind the Trump administration; and Stewart Resnick (\$6.3 billion), who owns much of the rights to water in all of California.

The \$222 billion held by Los Angeles billionaires could cover the estimated \$150 billion in damages caused by the fires and provide immediate relief to those affected. Moreover, the estimated damage from the fires is just a fraction of the \$1 trillion US military budget.

Los Angeles is also home to some of the largest and most profitable corporations in the world, spanning entertainment, healthcare, utilities and more. The Walt Disney Company, headquartered in Burbank, boasts a staggering market capitalization of \$201.30 billion, cementing its dominance in global media and entertainment. Live Nation Entertainment, based in Beverly Hills, holds a market value of \$29.80 billion, while Edison International in Rosemead, a major energy provider, has a market cap of \$27.95 billion.

These and other corporations must be transformed into public utilities, democratically controlled and operated on the basis of social need. Such a transformation would enable the mobilization of resources to rebuild fire-ravaged communities, combat climate change and meet the broader social needs of the population.

The Los Angeles fires are not merely a natural disaster; they are a devastating indictment of capitalism's inability to address the needs of humanity. They underscore the urgent necessity of building a movement of the working class, independent of both the Democratic and Republican parties, to fight for socialism.

The Socialist Equality Party is spearheading the fight for this program. Fill out the form below for information on joining the SEP.



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