

Official death toll in Los Angeles fires climbs to 24, as rising winds threaten further devastation

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The official death toll for the fires currently scorching Los Angeles rose to 24 on Sunday evening, with at least another 12 missing. Officials continue to warn that the death toll is expected to rise as search and rescue teams continue to sift through burnt out homes and other buildings.

The two largest fires, the Palisades Fire in the west and the Eaton Fire in the northeast, are each only 11 percent and 27 percent contained, respectively. Together, they have burned more than 38,000 acres (more than 59 square miles; 95 square km) and 12,000 homes and other buildings. The smaller Hurst Fire, northwest of downtown LA, has burned more than 799 acres (3.23 square km) and is 76 percent contained.

Moreover, the National Interagency Fire Center has predicted that the Santa Ana winds, which originate inland and blow through coastal Southern California, are slated to pick up Sunday night through Wednesday. Gusts up to 60 miles (96.5 km) per hour in a southwest direction are expected, threatening a significant expansion of the ongoing fires.

“There will be the potential—especially late Monday night through Wednesday—for explosive fire growth as those winds pick back up,” said Ariel Cohen, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service, to the *Los Angeles Times*. “In the case of an evacuation order being issued, you have to follow that immediately. Seconds could save your life.”

In addition to the deaths, the broader social toll continues to rise. An estimated 105,000 people remain under evacuation orders, while another 87,000 have been issued evacuation warnings. Throughout the fire, at least 500,000 have lost power as power lines are burned down or turned off to prevent sparks from

causing further flames. At the peak of the outages, 172,000 residents in LA were without electricity.

The official response for those displaced has been extremely limited. The Los Angeles Fire Department is issuing gift cards of only \$250 to affected households, cards provided by the California Fire Foundation nonprofit. And the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has not increased its limit on the grants for those who have lost their homes, which is capped at \$87,970. A typical 2,000 square foot house in Los Angeles costs upwards of \$900,000 to build.

In an appearance on “Face the Nation” on Sunday, FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell attempted to justify the paltry amount provided to workers to rebuild their homes by stating that FEMA’s programs are only there to “help jump start the recovery process” and that insurance is the “number one resource that families have to help with their rebuilding process.”

In reality, insurance is increasingly out of reach for working class families. A recent article in the *Los Angeles Times* noted that the annual cost for homeowners insurance from Farmers Insurance for those living in the Pacific Palisades, where thousands of homes have burned down, has skyrocketed from \$4,500 to \$18,000 in the past year.

The article also reported that State Farm, California’s largest insurer, announced in March that it would not renew 30,000 home and condo policies when they expire, citing high wildfire risk. Other insurance companies, including Chubb, Allstate, Tokio Marine America Insurance Co. and Trans Pacific Insurance Co., have either stopped writing new policies or pulled out of the state entirely.

Instead, workers are forced to sign up for the

California FAIR Plan, which has seen a jump to 452,000 policies, rising from 203,000 four years ago. At the same time, the policies themselves provide fewer benefits when homes burn down.

Tacitly acknowledging this state of affairs, Criswell in her interview callously stated that “families are going to have to find other means to be able to rebuild.”

Moreover, in a Thursday afternoon press conference, Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors Chairperson Kathryn Barger admitted that residents who had already applied for FEMA assistance had been getting denied for the grants. FEMA requires that households prove that any aid provided by federal grants is not duplicated by insurance, which can take months as insurers purposefully move slowly to avoid paying out as many claims as possible.

Barger admitted, “The process itself is long.” Cold comfort for those who have lost everything in the blazes.

Governor Gavin Newsom, for his part, continued to escalate the militarized response to the fires, on Sunday adding another 1,000 California National Guard to the state’s mobilization. The total personnel deployed has now reached about 2,500.

In doing so, Newsom emphasized the “public safety” aspect of the deployments, continuing the focus of law enforcement officials on alleged “looters” and “arsonists” while largely blowing past the colossal social devastation caused by the fires.

Newsom is also no doubt keen to avoid any discussion of his own responsibility in laying the groundwork for such a catastrophe. According to a report from *Newsweek*, Newsom’s latest budget covering the 2024-2025 fiscal year slashed \$101 million from the state’s firefighting budget, including a \$12 million “home hardening” program set up to develop new methods to protect homes against such fires.

Millions more were slashed from efforts to prevent fires in the first place, including conservation efforts and wildfire fuel management and brush clearing.

The response of the working class to the fires, on the other hand, has been immediate and unconditional. At virtually every site where those who have been forced to evacuate are staying, there has been an overwhelming response from the working class with continuing donations of water, food, medicine,

blankets, tents, pet food, children’s toys and other supplies flooding in to aid those impacted.

Matthew, a 16-year-old volunteer with his local church, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “We’re here and we decided to get some supplies and make little gift bags like for men, women, or like unisex, like for both. And we’re here giving them out. We put them here, and we put them in different sizes and everything, so we just give them out to people.

“A bunch of people are losing their homes; they’re losing their stuff. A bunch of people are in need of a bunch of things, it’s not a good thing.”

Matthew also commented on the danger of the incoming Trump administration and the threats to deport millions of immigrants, many of whom live in LA. “I think that’s really bad because it can really separate a bunch of families. Like kids are being separated from their parents, and well, since they were born here, they’re not going to get deported. They’re just going to be separated. I forgot exactly where they go, the children, but it just makes things harder for everybody.”

Moreover, the initial \$87 billion proposed by Trump to deport every undocumented immigrant in the US is only a small part of the vast amount of resources squandered by the American state on police state measures at home and the bourgeoisie’s wars abroad, much less the trillions spent to bail out the banks and major corporations when the stock markets crash.

As the WSWS wrote in its recent statement:

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 the billionaires must be confiscated and redirected toward addressing the needs of those affected by the fires.



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