

The exploitation of inmates in the Los Angeles wildfires

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The devastating fires in Los Angeles and other areas of California reveal not just the failure of capitalism to address root causes such as climate change, inadequate resources, aging infrastructure and the absence of serious preventive measures, but also the ruthless reality of capitalist exploitation. Nearly a third of the thousands of firefighters battling these blazes, rightfully lauded for their bravery, are inmates from California's prisons. While it may seem like a story of redemption and reintegration at first glance, their involvement reveals the exploitative and hazardous system that supports this practice.

The 13th Amendment abolished slavery and involuntary servitude in the United States, "except as a punishment for crime." This loophole created a financial incentive to criminalize individuals and exploit their labor. Today, those enduring inhumane and barbaric prison conditions or facing the threat of further punishment are compelled to work for little to no compensation. A *Forbes* report indicates that \$11 billion in prison labor is used each year, in occupations ranging from producing hand sanitizer and digging mass graves during COVID-19 to cleaning up hazardous waste.

Inmates assigned to fight fires receive paltry compensation and empty promises. According to the California Department of Correction and Rehabilitation's website, the maximum pay ranges from \$5.80 to \$10.24 per day, with an extra \$1 per hour for emergency responses, up to \$26.90 for a 24-hour shift. That reflects a pay increase implemented last year, which approximately doubled these wage ranges.

In stark contrast to the salaries of professional firefighters, which can vary from a pittance of \$16 an hour to \$50 per hour based on rank and experience, the pay for inmates

represents the most extreme exploitation. The state and corporations reap significant benefits from this ultra-cheap labor, saving millions of dollars each year while providing little in return to the inmates.

Fighting wildfires is a perilous job that requires physical stamina and poses constant risks to life. Inmates are frequently sent into the most hazardous situations, where they clear brush and create firebreaks to halt the spread of flames. However, unlike professional firefighters, they undergo shorter and less thorough training, lack access to essential equipment like breathing apparatuses (SCBAs) in certain high-risk areas, and receive inadequate healthcare if injured.

The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) recognizes the dangers but defends the program as "voluntary." In truth, the coercive nature of the prison system, coupled with the promise of reduced sentences, minimal pay and potential job opportunities, leaves inmates with little genuine choice.

For those who take part, the repercussions of injury or death are severe. Injured inmates encounter significant barriers to obtaining medical care, and their families receive no compensation in the event of a fatality—on top of the families' lack of knowledge about when or where the inmates are deployed. The state's dependence on inmate labor has enabled politicians across the spectrum to slash vital budgets, leading to disastrous outcomes. The training that inmate firefighters receive is not nearly on par with that of professional firefighters.

While they learn basic skills like cutting firebreaks and using certain tools, they do not get comprehensive training to handle complex and extremely dangerous wildfire situations. Their training often spans just a few

weeks and emphasizes physical tasks rather than the strategic and safety-focused elements that are crucial in firefighting.

It is no coincidence that inmate firefighters have some of the highest injury rates among prison workers. Moreover, they are four times more likely to sustain injuries compared to other firefighters.

The dangers are very real:

- In 2016, 22-year-old Shawna Lynn Jones was killed while fighting a fire to protect a hillside of mansions in the ultra-wealthy resort town of Malibu, California.

- In 2017, Matthew Beck, a 26-year-old inmate, was killed when a 120-foot tree fell on him during a firefighting operation in Humboldt County. Beck, who was nearing the end of his sentence, had been working long hours in hazardous conditions with limited safety oversight.

- Similarly, in 2020, 35-year-old Charles Morton, an inmate firefighter, was fatally burned while battling the El Dorado Fire in San Bernardino County.

- Most notably, in 1990, the entire Perryville inmate crew died in Arizona when the Dude Fire burned over them, killing Sandra Bachman, a guard for the crew from the Arizona State Prison Complex-Perryville and inmate-firefighters James Ellis, Joseph Chacon, Alex Contreras, James Denney and Curtis Springfield.

The state maintains that this work helps prisoners acquire valuable skills and contribute to society. However, once released, inmates encounter significant obstacles to finding employment. Despite their experience, most are barred from joining professional firefighting teams due to strict licensing requirements and the stigma attached to a criminal record.

While Democrats often position themselves as advocates for criminal justice reform, their actions reveal a willingness to sustain and expand this exploitative system. In California, a state largely governed by Democratic Party elected officials, inmate labor programs have flourished.

Days after the fires in Los Angeles erupted, California State Assembly member Isaac Bryan introduced Assembly Bill 247, aimed at raising wages for incarcerated firefighters. The proposed legislation seeks to align their pay with the lowest professional state firefighter wage. This initiative, backed by a few wealthy

celebrities like Kim Kardashian, fails to address the coercive labor conditions that strip away freedom and agency.

Rather than tackling the root causes of crime—such as poverty, inequality and lack of access to education and healthcare—the capitalist state resorts to punitive measures that perpetuate incarceration. The prison-industrial complex thrives on this cycle, ensuring a continuous supply of cheap labor while neglecting the needs of incarcerated individuals and their communities.

To genuinely tackle the exploitation of inmate labor, workers must confront the entire capitalist system that creates and sustains these conditions. Crime is not an inherent trait of individuals but rather a byproduct and symptom of systemic inequality. The criminalization of poverty and the commodification of labor mean that the most vulnerable members of society carry the heaviest burden.

A socialist approach focuses on the needs of the working class, channeling substantial resources into social programs, public services, education, and healthcare to eliminate the conditions that lead to crime. Breaking the cycle of exploitation and criminalization necessitates dismantling the capitalist system and its profit-driven prison-industrial complex, while redirecting resources to essential social programs.

The fires in Los Angeles highlight the urgent need for systemic change. The courage and sacrifice of inmate firefighters deserve acknowledgment, but not at the expense of their exploitation. Workers are the only social force capable of building a society that prioritizes human dignity over profit. The struggle extends beyond seeking justice for inmates; it is about fighting for a system where all workers can live free from exploitation and oppression.



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