

# As viruses spread in Los Angeles shelters, fire survivors discuss the class issues

“The workers produce everything. It’s not fair that most of the money is in the hands of a few”

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The Palisades and Eaton fires, which continue to ravage large parts of the Los Angeles area, serve as stark reminders of the systemic failure of disaster prevention and recovery under capitalism.

More than two weeks after the fires first emerged they continue to threaten residents and produce dangerous smoke. Containment levels are at, respectively, 59 percent and 87 percent. More than 12,000 structures, mostly homes, have been damaged or destroyed since the fires broke out earlier this month.

On Monday, gusty Santa Ana winds returned to southern California, prompting the National Weather Service to warn of a “particularly dangerous situation” for parts of Los Angeles and Ventura counties through Tuesday morning, when gusts are expected to reach 70 miles per hour along the coast and up to 100 miles per hour through the mountain passes.

In addition to the immediate danger from the flames, the fires have forced thousands into shelters, where reports of a rapidly spreading stomach flu highlight the authorities’ neglect of basic sanitary measures. This situation echoes the disastrous response to COVID-19, where the government negligence at every level has worsened suffering and increased the loss of life.

Evacuation shelters, intended to offer safety, have instead turned into breeding grounds for viral infections. An outbreak of gastrointestinal illnesses caused by the highly contagious norovirus among evacuees in Pasadena shelters was both foreseeable and avoidable. Despite clear evidence from past disasters emphasizing the need for strict sanitation protocols,

authorities failed to take necessary preventative actions. This neglect leaves evacuees at risk for the spread of other viruses, including respiratory infections like COVID-19, RSV and influenza, which thrive in crowded environments.

The apathy of officials toward these conditions is not coincidental; it reflects a broader attitude aimed at evading responsibility. By portraying the outbreak as an unfortunate but unavoidable result of displacement, authorities divert attention from their failure to take proactive measures. This pattern was also evident at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, where the lack of preparation and resources was rationalized by appeals to individual responsibility rather than systemic accountability. Once again, those most affected are left to shoulder the consequences of systemic neglect.

The crisis is compounded by the reality that these shelters are only temporary, leaving thousands of evacuees facing an uncertain future without homes to return to. The Palisades and Eaton fires have wiped out entire communities, and the rebuilding process is expected to be slow and insufficient. Meanwhile, evacuees are forced to deal with a dire situation and no clear way forward.

Adding to the controversy are reports indicating that the fires might have been sparked by the electrical grid. Residents in Altadena have reported seeing electrical sparks just before the fires broke out. These accounts correspond with data showing a significant rise in power grid faults leading up to the fires. If verified, these findings would confirm the responsibility of the utility companies, as their negligence has often played a

role in California's wildfires. Yet, these corporations refuse to adequately upgrade their infrastructure and continue to operate without consequence, protected by both major political parties and a "regulatory" framework that prioritizes their profits over public safety.

Rather than tackling these systemic issues, officials have shifted the blame onto individuals, perpetuating the false narrative that better brush clearance around homes could have averted the fires. This claim was recently challenged by fire ecologist Alexandra Syphard, who pointed out that clearing brush would have had little to no impact on preventing these fires. Despite this evidence, figures like newly inaugurated President Donald Trump persist in spreading misleading assertions that place responsibility on residents while overlooking the underlying structural problems, including inadequate infrastructure and climate change.

The Palisades and Eaton fires are not just isolated events; they reflect a larger issue of neglect in disaster response across the United States. The failure to maintain power grids and the absence of effective evacuation and shelter plans highlight the responsibility of those in power for this crisis. As evacuees face illness and uncertainty, it becomes evident that systemic change is urgently needed. This change involves not only holding utility companies accountable but also adopting a response that prioritizes public health and safety over profits. Without a systemic change, disasters like the Palisades and Eaton fires will continue to reveal and worsen the dangerous cracks of a failed system.

Altadena residents have spoken to the WSWS, expressing resentment against a system that has failed the working population.

Valentino, a survivor and evacuee who lost the home where he lived for 35 years explained, "They say they are going to help the people, the tenants, with \$700. And they will help the owners of the houses with \$10,000. Even \$10,000 is just the rent for half a year for a single apartment!"

He elaborated on the \$770 offered by the Biden administration: "Well, it's nothing, you know, maybe only for food for maybe three weeks. But you know, there are many people with families, with children, with a wife, what are they going to do?"

Reflecting on the class divide, Valentino commented: "I heard that in Pacific Palisades all those lands are going to be bought by some super big powerful real estate companies. And they are planning to build a city of the future there. You know, the best apartment, the best houses for the super-rich, a city of the future. Wow. Okay, that's good for them. But how about the common people?"

Valentino emphasized the extreme level of systemic crisis: "This capitalist country is going down. This is still the most popular country on earth, but it's going down very fast," he said. "Capitalism is going down in history like the monarchy in Europe. [The aristocracy] were the richest. Then the industry came and the industrialist people became richer than the monarchy. Now the capitalists are going down. So now a world government is coming. Some kind of socialist [system]. Because that's the best for most of the people. The workers produce everything. It's not fair that most of the money is in the hands of a few."



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