

One year since the Northern California Camp Fire

An accounting of a crime

By Toby Reese
11 November 2019

November 8 marked one year since the outbreak of the Camp Fire, which raged through Butte County in the Sierra foothills of Northern California for over two weeks in 2018. The fire was the deadliest and most destructive in the history of the state, taking the lives of 85 residents of the town of Paradise, destroying over 18,804 structures, and burning over 153,000 acres. It was, in dollar terms, the most costly natural disaster in the world in 2018.

In the wake of the fire, the *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed Paradise residents who had lost their homes but had no insurance, little savings and few prospects following the fire. The donation centers and shelters have long since closed their doors, yet many people remain homeless without the resources to rebuild.

One year after the fire, the devastation to the region persists, with many families still struggling to regain their footing and restore a semblance of their pre-disaster lives. The government has provided little help to the victims. As one woman told *Buzzfeed*, speaking of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, “It’s always ‘at least a couple months’ from FEMA.”

Amid a rash of new fires this year in both the northern and southern regions of the state, it is necessary to review what took place in the Camp Fire and discuss what conclusions should be drawn.

The fire in Paradise, California

In the two days leading up to the fire, Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) notified some residents of Paradise that their power might be shut off following forecasts of high winds and low humidity. The company decided to cut power to some areas of the town on November 7, a practice that has since become standard operating procedure by the giant utility whenever weather conditions and its own lack of safety, maintenance and infrastructure spending combine to threaten an outbreak of wildfires, along with the law suits and damage claims that inevitably follow. The company has invented a term for these deliberate power outages: “Public Safety Power Shutoff,” or PSPS.

The true concern driving these shutoffs is not public safety, but rather the company’s bottom line, the value of its stock and the bond holdings of its big investors.

At about 6:15 am on November 8, an issue was reported at a transmission line near Camp Creek Road, roughly four miles from Paradise. A fire was reported to Cal Fire at 6:33 am, and within 15 minutes the fire spanned some 10 acres and was rapidly spreading. Due to the restricted access provided by one narrow mountain road, air support was required to fight the fire, but severe and erratic winds did not allow this support to arrive until early afternoon.

The sheriff’s office began evacuating the small community of Pulga at 7:23 am, but despite numerous phone reports of a “ripping” fire, visible

smoke and a bright red glow to the east, Cal Fire instructed Paradise residents to remain where they were. Early callers to the Cal Fire station were told that the fire was north of town and there was no need to evacuate.

According to reports after the disaster, by that time the fire was spreading at the rate of 80 football fields per minute, sending embers in many directions for miles. Some of the embers swept across the canyon separating Paradise from the fire. By 8 am, the fire had entered the town, and several minutes later evacuation orders for all of Paradise were given to dispatchers by the Butte County Fire Department.

Due to intense winds and rapidly spreading flames, firefighters and law enforcement officials immediately focused on evacuating residents and did not have the manpower to fight the fire. Evacuation problems were compounded by the fact that there was little warning and there were few roads out of the town. Residents were stuck in long, single-file lines of traffic as flames, ash, and smoke enveloped them on both sides. Many jumped out of their cars and ran on foot from the fire. Others perished in their cars. Some victims, mostly elderly, died in their homes without receiving any notice or warning.

PG&E’s culpability

In the aftermath of the fire, investigators determined that, as in 11 other fires the preceding year, the direct cause was the malfunction of a PG&E transmission line and equipment. The company was aware that the equipment, nearly 100 years old at the time of the fire, needed repair and updating, yet neglected to do so.

According to a Wall Street Journal investigative report, PG&E was aware of numerous problems, including many outdated and potentially hazardous transmission lines and towers. The company had notified the US Forest Service of these problems over previous years.

Despite these dangers, PG&E continued to issue dividends to its shareholders from 2005 until December 20 of 2017, when it issued a press statement citing concerns that the company might be found “liable for property damage and attorneys’ fees associated with [fires].”

PG&E is the sole provider of power for 16 million Californians across 70,000 square miles, from Eureka south to Bakersfield, and from the Pacific Ocean east to the Sierra Nevada mountain range. The company operates over 120,000 miles of electric distribution and transmission lines, as well as over 40,000 miles of natural gas distribution and transmission pipelines. PG&E, along with Southern California Edison and San Diego Gas & Electric, has ostensibly been regulated by the California Public Utilities Commission since the latter was created by the state legislature in 1911.

While PG&E has failed to update its infrastructure (much of which dates back almost to the birth of the company in 1905), clear brush or

carry out other basic safety measures, no politicians, including the many who have received campaign funding from PG&E, have put forward a serious strategy to solve the crisis confronting millions of Californians. Regulatory agencies have done next to nothing to force the utility to change safety protocols.

In the course of this year's fire season in California, the company has implemented the brutal policy of power shutoffs, impacting millions of Californians for days and even weeks at a time. The repeated blackouts in northern California, duplicated by the power companies in other parts of the state, resemble the conditions experienced in underdeveloped countries that have been ravaged by the US military, such as Iraq.

Were California a separate country, it would have the fifth largest economy in the world, with an annual gross domestic product of about \$2.9 trillion. Moreover, California is home to 157 billionaires, with a combined net worth surpassing \$9 trillion.

San Francisco, the site of PG&E's headquarters, is home to more billionaires per capita than any other city in the world, including Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, who is worth upwards of \$70 billion. According to some estimates, it would cost around \$100 billion—or the combined wealth of two or three Bay Area billionaires—to bury all of PG&E's power lines, most of which are still suspended between flammable wooden poles.

Rolling blackouts last month led to the death of 67-year-old Robert Mardis of Pollock Pines, who was dependent on oxygen and died 12 minutes after his power was shut off. The PSPS practice has been detrimental to working class communities and small businesses, causing millions financial harm and disruptions to their daily lives. During last month's shutoffs, a new wave of fires erupted throughout the state, including the Kincade fire in northern California, which may also be connected to PG&E equipment and is currently under investigation.

The power shutoffs do nothing to address the urgently needed repairs to dangerous and outdated power lines and their placement underground, nor do they address the fundamental issue of climate change, which is directly linked to the fires. Wildfires exacerbate the damage to the ozone layer, which in turn creates warmer temperatures and results in more wildfires and longer fire seasons.

The irrationality of capitalism

Shortly after the 2008 Humboldt Fire, which narrowly missed the town of Paradise, a Butte County Grand Jury Review found that evacuation routes out of Paradise would be insufficient if a fire were to cross the adjacent canyon and sweep into the town. Reading the report, one finds an eerie warning of the future disaster that would befall the small town in 2018, just a decade later.

The report states that “a moratorium on all multi-home development in fire-prone areas is recommended until all fire safety, traffic, and emergency water supply issues are resolved.”

It notes that all roads out of Paradise are limited to one lane in each direction and include sharp curves, inadequate shoulders and adjacent fire hazard areas, increasing the danger of road closure.

In a revealing segment from the recent PBS “Frontline” documentary *Fire in Paradise*, officials discuss how during a trial evacuation run it became clear that “the more evacuation you were doing, the more cars on the road, the more it wouldn't work.”

Yet the politicians of the two big business parties concluded at the time that there was “no money” to carry out the report's recommendation to widen the roads. The deadly implications of this became all too clear in the widespread loss of life in last year's Camp Fire, including victims who died on clogged roads that were engulfed in flames.

Wildfires may occur naturally, but when they occur, how they occur and under what conditions is another matter. The scale of destruction is largely determined by human factors.

In the case of Paradise, the majority of the victims were elderly and working class. Many moved into the foothills from the Bay Area to escape rising housing costs, which have also driven tens of thousands into homelessness.

Gavin Newsom, the Democratic governor of California, has attempted to save face by posturing as “tough” on PG&E, despite having received substantial donations from that company in his 2018 election campaign. While denouncing the “greedy” corporation during the recent Kincade Fire, earlier this year Newsom signed into law a bill that creates a \$21 billion fund to cover the costs of the utility companies' future wildfire liabilities. This is to be paid for by state residents through rate increases. The population of California has already been paying increased rates to cover the costs of wildfire damages since the early 2000s.

On January 4, 2019, PG&E announced that it was pursuing Chapter 11 bankruptcy proceedings, primarily due to lawsuits against the company related to wildfires. The proceedings and calls for a “state buyout” of the energy giant are aimed at shielding executives, stockholders and bondholders from financial losses.

Following the announcement of the bankruptcy filing, speculators snapped up stock in the company at a frenzied pace, hoping to make a killing by buying the stock at pennies on the dollar and selling it later at multiples of the purchase price after the state had engineered a bailout of stock and bondholders. They were also counting on a rise in stock prices due to bankruptcy court-sanctioned cuts in employee pensions, reduced payouts to fire victims and increased rates for customers.

Alternative proposals to break up PG&E's monopoly status within the framework of capitalist private ownership of utilities and the profit system will do nothing to resolve the safety issues bound up with the diversion of resources away from the upgrading of infrastructure and modernization of the electrical system and the lack of regulation of the utility industry. Inevitably the result would be further deregulation, lower safety standards, higher customer rates and no reduction in wildfires.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has commented on more than one occasion that behind every natural disaster is a social disaster. Nothing illustrates this more clearly than the last year's Camp Fire. The root cause of the scale of devastation and death is the capitalist system, which subordinates even the most basic human needs to private profit. Corporations, shareholders and Wall Street bankers and hedge fund operators, with the assistance of their bribed political representatives in both the Democratic and Republican parties, have a stranglehold over vital productive forces, with horrific consequences for working people.

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