

The California wildfires, climate change and capitalism

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The wildfires burning through the US West Coast, the largest on record in the history of California and which may become the largest in the country, have already killed 33 people and threaten to displace hundreds of thousands.

Just one of these fires, the August Complex in California, has consumed more than 875,000 acres. Until yesterday afternoon, the entire city of Portland was on alert for a mass evacuation as local and state officials warned of a “mass fatality event” if the fires reached Oregon’s largest city.

In a year that has already seen massive and uncontrolled wildfires in the Amazon and in Australia, the California fires make clear the immense dangers posed to human society by climate change, and the total inability of capitalism to address the problem.

The disaster is compounded by the coronavirus pandemic, particularly in California, where the number of cases is still increasing by more than 3,000 a day, with a total of more than 760,000 confirmed cases so far. Residents are now forced to either stay in place, socially distance and risk death by wildfire, or evacuate to a shelter and risk infection.

The official “COVID-19 Interim Shelter Guidance” from the office of Oregon Governor Kate Brown admits these dangers. The document warns: “All shelter residents, even those without symptoms, may have been exposed to COVID-19 and should self-quarantine after leaving the shelter in accordance with state and local recommendations.”

Scientists have long warned that climate change is intensifying wildfires. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned just last year that as global temperatures increase, damage caused by wildfires will grow proportionally. This has been noted both for regions such as the American west, but also in Australia, Brazil, central Africa, Europe and even Siberia.

Further scientific warnings were raised earlier this year in conjunction with the mass wildfires in Australia and Brazil, which saw record fires in those countries.

Like hurricanes on the East coast and in states on the Gulf of Mexico, the likelihood of natural disasters that form a “perfect storm” of weather conditions increases as global

warming continues unabated. Hurricanes such as Sandy, Harvey and Maria, once thought of as “storms of the century,” are now expected to happen once every 16 years. The same is true of the infernos now raging.

The Trump administration is spearheading a frontal assault on all environmental regulations, eliminating even the most token restrictions on emissions, fracking, and offshore drilling. Trump has also rolled back controls for emissions of methane—a greenhouse gas 80 times more potent than carbon dioxide—and appointed Scott Pruitt, an attorney previously used by the oil and gas industry to sue the Environmental Protection Agency, to head that same organization.

For his part, California Governor Gavin Newsom attempted to pose as a strong advocate for climate science, telling reporters, “The debate is over, around climate change,” at a press conference outside the North Complex Fire. He added: “This is a climate damn emergency. This is real and it’s happening.”

Yet for all his rhetoric, Newsom has helped expand the fossil fuel industry in California along similar lines to Trump’s policies nationally. During his first ten months in office, Newsom approved 33 percent more new oil and gas drilling permits than his predecessor Jerry Brown. He also dropped a proposal from earlier this year to further regulate the industry after his administration received a letter from the California Independent Petroleum Association, an oil and gas lobbying group, urging him to do so.

The flagship for such hypocrisy is the “Biden Plan for a Clean Energy Revolution and Environmental Justice” put out by Joe Biden’s presidential campaign. It asserts that a “Green New Deal is a crucial framework for meeting the climate challenges we face,” and claims that Biden will “[e]nsure the U.S. achieves a 100% clean energy economy and reaches net-zero emissions no later than 2050.”

Readers should recall the legacy of the Obama-Biden administration on environmental policy before expecting Biden to carry forth any of this platform. During their second year in office they spearheaded the efforts to conceal the full extent of the Deepwater Horizon disaster, the largest

oil spill to date in the Gulf of Mexico and which caused hundreds of billions of dollars in damages to the entire region. After it became impossible to hide the billions of barrels of oil being pumped in the Gulf, they worked to shield BP as much as possible from any liability while accelerating deep-sea drilling deregulation that caused the explosion in the first place.

Obama spearheaded efforts to expand offshore and Arctic drilling. In 2015, he let Royal Dutch Shell resume drilling after a series of near-disasters three years prior. That same year, he opened up the Atlantic coast for drilling for the first time, despite warnings against offshore drilling issued in the aftermath of Deepwater Horizon.

The Obama White house did nothing to stop the environmentally destructive hydraulic fracturing techniques that massively expanded under Obama and Biden in the search by various corporations for cheap sources of natural gas.

Biden's platform also shows that the "Green New Deal" is a vacuous slogan that can mean anything one wants. Biden can call for a "Green New Deal" while simultaneously declaring, "I am not banning fracking," referring to the practice of natural gas extraction that has poisoned much of Appalachia.

When Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez released the initial "deal" proposal, she called for "a transition to 100 percent renewable energy within 10 years, and actions to "virtually eliminate poverty in the United States." Essentially the only common characteristic between the two plans is the assertion that it is possible to solve the climate crisis without challenging the capitalist system and the private ownership of production.

It is also significant that the demand for a "Green New Deal" has been adopted by the Green Party. While they seek to contrast themselves from the Democrats, their program on climate change makes a call to "Enact an emergency Green New Deal to turn the tide on climate change," essentially verbatim from Biden's plan.

The Green Party also calls for a "WWII-scale national mobilization to halt climate change," modelled on the original proposal by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. The wartime rhetoric only underscores the nationalist character of this approach, based on the idea that the climate crisis can be solved in a single country, or through capitalist states addressing climate change via treaty agreements.

Climate change itself is a global phenomenon. As many recent scientific papers on the topic have stressed, the only real solution to halting global warming and all its ongoing and oncoming catastrophes is through a reorganization of the world's energy production and transportation infrastructure and the development of new technologies to

immediately halt carbon emissions.

To seriously address climate change requires a major reorganization of economic life on a global scale. The framework of energy production has to be transitioned from one that uses fossil fuels to one that relies on renewable energy. This, in turn, requires an international effort, involving a massive influx of funding for infrastructure, the development of current technologies and the investigation of new ideas, rather than the squandering of trillions of dollars on war and the self-enrichment of the world's billionaires.

The technology exists to solve these problems, as well as for increasing the living standards and quality of life of the world's population. Yet it is impossible to do so within the framework of the capitalist system.

Any effort to genuinely tackle climate change comes into conflict with the nation-state system and the broader framework of capitalism itself. The necessary influx of funds to temper the fires and abate the climate crisis collide with the private ownership of production and the enrichment of a tiny elite at the expense of society as a whole. As long as a handful of billionaires dominate society, with every aspect of economic life geared to their personal enrichment, not a single social problem—including climate change—can be solved.

This makes the solution to climate change an inherently *class* question and a *revolutionary* question. It is the working class that will suffer the brunt of the impact of global warming. It is the working class that is objectively and increasingly defining itself as an *international* class. It is the working class whose social interests lie in the overthrow of capitalism and the abolition of private ownership of the means of production, which will open the way to the establishment of an economic system based on the satisfaction of human need, including a safe and healthy environment.

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