

United States - California Wildfires : Climate Change, Prison Labor, and the Electric Company

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The intense wildfires that have gripped California once again in late summer and autumn seem to have abated.

The mainstream media have covered these fires, which were concentrated in the area north of San Francisco and the upscale west side of Los Angeles, in graphic detail. They have covered the devastation these fires have wrought. What they have downplayed or not covered at all is the underlying cause of the great intensification of these fires in recent years, as well as related issues.

Barely mentioned (and then only in passing) is the glaring underlying cause of climate change due to global warming.

California has what is known as a “Mediterranean climate” – a rainy season in the late fall, winter and early spring – and a dry season for the rest of the year. Vegetation flourishes in the rainy season, and then much of it dries out in the yearly drought. By the end of summer and into autumn, the lush vegetation that has dried out creates abundant fuel for forest fires.

In addition, this season also creates a situation of high winds in certain mountainous areas. In the central valley, temperatures become high in the virtual desert. The expanding hot air is raised as it encounters the low mountains to the west, and then picks up speed as it crosses the valleys and mountains and then comes down into the area below towards the ocean and starts to gradually lessen.

Hot air, low humidity, abundant fuel and the winds means that these areas north of San Francisco and on the hilly side of the San Francisco Bay Area, as well as the hills on Los Angeles’ west side, are prone to fires.

Over the years, the flora and fauna in these regions have adapted to the fires, and have been in an equilibrium. But global warming has upset this equilibrium, and qualitatively intensified the fires and increased their number.

Global warming has raised the temperatures in the desert greatly in the dry season, more than the average increase it has caused across the globe, intensifying the speed of the winds. In the largest fire this year north of San Francisco, winds reached unheard of levels of 60 miles per hour, with gusts of 80 mph and even once of 100 mph – hurricane force winds.

Higher temperatures mean lower humidity and both contribute to the ferociousness of the fires.

There is another feature of climate change that has affected weather around the world, including having an impact on the California fires. That fact is that the arctic is warming much more quickly than scientists had thought. It is also warming more than the average global temperature rise. This has affected the jet stream, and weakened it.

This means that weather systems can stay around longer than in the past. This happened during the high temperatures in the recent wildfires in California, prolonging the danger.

The jet stream has also increased its wandering as a result. As I write this, the jet stream is above California near the Canadian border, but then turns abruptly well into the south, allowing colder arctic air to plunge into much of the U.S., bolstering global warming deniers' fake arguments.

In recent years global warming has lengthened the dry season, the fire season. It is true this may be upset by the unpredictability of the jet stream.

Prisoner Labor

A fact concerning the recent wildfires that the mainstream media completely ignores is the use of convicts as firefighters. The difficulty of battling the fires necessitated the use of fire fighters from across the state and from nearby western states, as well as 700 California prisoners, totaling 4,000.

The regular firefighters earn an annual mean wage of about \$74,000 a year plus benefits, while the prisoner firefighters earn about \$1 an hour. The very low wages that are typically paid to prisoners for their work is rooted in the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, passed after the Civil War, that abolished slavery. However, it made an exception, allowing prisoners to be forced into "involuntary servitude".

This exception was one of the pillars of the reaction to the Civil War and Reconstruction that established the Jim Crow period of extreme oppression of Blacks in the South, epitomized by the infamous chain gangs. However, it was also used in the rest of the country, and after the overthrow of Jim Crow in the 1960s, to justify low wages or no wages for prisoners' work in the jails or outside.

The only reporting of the prisoner fire fighters I've seen has been on Democracy Now. The prisoner fire fighters are fully trained. Democracy Now found in visits to the firefighter camps that these fire fighters are "very treasured by the free fire fighters because they do so much of the most dangerous work."

While these incarcerated fire fighters appreciate getting out in the open air, and doing something that is quite socially useful, they find that in spite of their training and experience, they are not allowed to become regular fire fighters once released.

Democracy Now interviewed Amika Mota, a former prison fire fighter who is now policy director at the Young Women's Freedom Center in San Francisco. She said, "I think it doesn't really make sense that we come home and there's this barrier. We are not able to get [Emergency Medical Training] licenses [because of our prison records], which is what we need to be working at municipal fire departments

"We have folks that are really trained up and have the potential to come home and be a really productive member of society and have stable careers, and that is not happening."

Role of Pacific Gas and Electric

Another big issue concerning these wildfires that has been in the media is the role of the private utility company that covers much of northern and central California, Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E). Even before this year's fires it has been proven that the rickety and old PG&E electrical system has been proven responsible for sparking many of the fires in recent years, including some of the most horrific destruction of whole cities and loss of life.

Of course the dry tinder can be set by many other sources, but PG&E is responsible for many. PG&E has neglected to maintain its high and low voltage lines and towers, and also has failed to clear away trees from them, which can blow down in the high winds bringing power lines down. It also has neglected to clear the dry brush near the towers.

Over a decade ago, I learned from a PG&E operator (a fellow socialist) in a control facility that the company was laying off maintenance workers while the system was deteriorating.

There have been many lawsuits brought against the company for its role in initiating many of the fires. The result has been that PG&E was forced into bankruptcy even before this year's fires.

This year it has caused major blackouts lasting for days affecting millions when high fire risks have been declared in an attempt to avoid more lawsuits, although some fires were sparked by the system anyway. The great hardships these blackouts have caused to millions of citizens for days are also costs that PG&E should pay.

Massive evacuation orders in front of the fires have affected tens of thousands, forcing them into makeshift shelters, many into tents.

California Governor Gavin Newsome has blasted PG&E for its deliberate failure to maintain its infrastructure in order to increase its bottom line. This should be treated as a criminal offense given the loss of life and destruction PG&E helped cause. But no PG&E officials who carried out this deliberate policy have been indicted.

What does Newsom propose ? Using bonds backed by the state treasury to raise funds to bailout PG&E from bankruptcy and help it make the massive investments that are necessary to rectify its system. Shades of the big bailouts of the financial institutions in the Great Recession ! Newsome and his wife have received big donations from PG&E, to his election campaign and to her charity.

No wonder there has been an outcry against such a bailout, presently on hold.

What should be done is to force the PG&E stockholders (which include big banks) to pay what it owes to municipalities and individuals as a result of these lawsuits, as a first step.

Then PG&E should be "nationalized" by the state and made into a public utility, not only without compensation to the big stockholders but to force them to pay up the billions needed to remake the entire electrical system. After all, it's already a monopoly that has charged billions to its customers while refusing to utilize those billions to take care of its system while paying its stockholders and managers big bucks.

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