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State of emergency as California wildfires force 200,000 to evacuate



California Governor Gavin Newsom declared a State of Emergency Sunday as some 200,000 people in Sonoma County and surrounding areas of northern California were ordered to evacuate in the face of advancing wildfires, fueled by wind gusts reaching 90 miles per hour.

Apocalyptic scenes of families having only minutes to desperately grab provisions and prized possessions are unfolding. Residents fleeing the areas in the early hours of Sunday morning were met with heavy traffic and pitch-black conditions on the roads due to lack of electricity. Pacific Gas & Electric blacked out much of the region from Wednesday night in a “preemptive” move that failed to prevent the ignition of new fires. Cell phone service was out in many areas.

Wildfires of this magnitude are expected at the end of summer as dry winds pick up and large areas of uncleared brush fuel a firestorm, like that which last year destroyed thousands of homes and structures and wiped the entire town of Paradise off the map, killing at least 87 people.

The inability to prepare for annual, predictable wildfires is a damning indictment of the irrationality of capitalism and exposes the criminal indifference of the ruling class, particularly the Democratic Party, which controls the state. California is the wealthiest state in the country, and the world's fifth largest economy, home to Silicon Valley, Hollywood, and Beverly Hills.

On Saturday, Sonoma County evacuation orders forced 40,000 people to leave their homes. Only 24 hours later, the number more than quadrupled to nearly 200,000 people due to the effects of the "diablo" winds on the fires. The evacuation has uprooted residents from a massive area of the state from just outside Santa Rosa, the county seat, west to the Pacific Ocean.

The Kincadee fire, the largest in the Northern California area, has torn through 30,000 acres of land in just four days and is only 10 percent contained at the time of this writing. It is currently projected that nearly 30,000 structures are threatened, and the fire will take upwards of a week to contain.

Additional spot fires have ignited over the weekend, causing added damage in the area. Two additional fires in Contra Costa County have burned areas, causing portions of major highways 101 and I80 to close. Thousands of residents fleeing south from the Kincadee fire have been redirected east as Highway 101 and I80 are prime evacuation routes south from the fire zone.

During initial evacuation orders over the weekend, PG&E shutoffs began for the third time in recent weeks on Saturday, affecting nearly two million customers in California. The shutoff notices came in advance of record winds reaching up to 93 mph to hit the area Saturday evening. Blackouts are reported to last until Monday but are subject to change. Untold thousands of sick and elderly who rely on respirators and other electronic medical devices have been left to fend for themselves.

The blackouts have affected not only Sonoma County, the hardest hit by wildfire, but also counties along the Sierra Nevada foothills, including Alpine, Amador, Butte, Calaveras, El Dorado, Nevada, Placer, Sierra, Tehama, and Yuba counties, as well as Lake, Mendocino,

Napa and portions of San Mateo County, just south of San Francisco, and Kern County in the Central Valley.

Since the deadly experience from wildfires in recent years due to faulty power lines, PG&E has taken little or no preventative measures to eliminate the danger, such as transitioning from above-ground wooden electrical poles to steel poles or below-ground energy infrastructure. The lack of preventive measures only reveals PG&E as a company committed to the interests of private profit over any other consideration, including human life.

Now confronted with unprecedented wildfires, PG&E has chosen to impose a further burden on its customers through forced blackouts. Paul Doherty, a PG&E spokesman, reported that someone had shot at his company vehicle with a pellet gun, expressing the immense anger and frustration toward the company for punishing customers with power cutoffs lasting days on end.

Amidst the chaos of evacuation, the widespread power outages have contributed to the loss of phone service because cell towers require electricity and many small cell towers may not have a backup generator. Spotty cell service has resulted in many areas due to the blackouts, causing residents in evacuation areas to miss timely alerts.

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Additionally, many people in homes with landlines have also been unable to receive reliable alerts because many landlines use internet VoIP cables which do not work during blackouts. These instances are gross examples of company cost cutting and disregarding the lives of millions of people directly and indirectly affected by these wildfires.

Though currently the largest, the Kincade Fire is just one of over a thousand fires that have burned through sections of the Pacific coast in 2019, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Prevention.

The effects of climate change have increased the fire risk, as shown most notoriously in recent years with the Camp Fire and Tubbs Fire. In the western portion of the United States, fires are a danger 2-3 months longer than it was decades ago, which means fire season is almost year-round. The area burned has quadrupled since the 1970s, and not only has the area increased, the severity and frequency of fires have increased, and they have become more deadly.

As data has shown that fires have become more frequent and more severe, each coming fire season serves as an example of the deep social inequality in the state. The magnitude of devastation caused by the annual fires can by no means be attributed to a “natural disaster” but reflects the lack of preparedness by an indifferent ruling elite who themselves face no danger.

There are added financial pressures to residents in wildfire-prone areas. According to State Insurance Commissioner Ricardo Lara, California residents who are at risk of wildfire damage and in need of insurance are facing rising premiums, while some 350,000 homeowners throughout the state are reporting being dropped entirely from their fire insurance plans. The California Department of Insurance has seen cases where homeowners were paying an annual premium of \$800-\$1,000, but upon renewal, saw increases to as much as \$2,500-\$5,000.

As hundreds of thousands are uncertain where they will escape to and with little to no provisions, the elite of Silicon Valley have boarded private planes and hired small armies of private firefighters to protect their homes.

Over the weekend, Governor Newsom attempted to deflect the fact that social infrastructure, including fire departments, have been starved of funds for decades under California’s Democratic Party leadership. Newsom sought to place the entirety of the blame on PG&E, tweeting, “I have a message for PG&E: Your years and years of greed. Years and years of mismanagement. Years and years of putting shareholders over people. Are OVER.” Newsom received \$58,000 in contributions from PG&E for his 2018 campaign for Governor.

Earlier this month he cynically urged PG&E to provide affected customers an automatic credit or rebate of \$100 per residential customer and \$250 per small business as some compensation for their hardships. This piddling amount is a slap in the face to thousands who may likely lose their homes and entire livelihoods.

The working class is faced with two options: continued disasters of a colossal magnitude under capitalism, or the fight for socialism, to organize the productive forces and labor of millions to finally put an end to what are fundamentally manmade disasters.

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