

Fires, climate and prisons: Systemic racism, sexism is deadly

written by John Parker
September 19, 2020



Prisoner firefighters are paid \$5 a day.

Los Angeles, Sept. 18 — The National Interagency Fire Center, which provides unified guidance for fire agencies in the U.S., said the fires burning in Washington state, Oregon and California since the end of August have burnt over 4.5 million acres so far — an area larger than Connecticut.

The skies in California can attest to that. They've gone from grey to red and back to grey again and the air quality here in South Central Los Angeles is registered as USG — Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups — meaning folks with asthma and other pulmonary diseases shouldn't be outside exercising and should spend most of the day inside.

For some, this latest crisis drives home the warnings of scientists worldwide about the dangers of doing nothing about global warming. For others, like Trump and his flock, it's just about the origin of the fires, the match, or the lightning, or whatever initially started the fire. We needn't concern ourselves, they say, with the intensity and duration of the fire that follows, just focus on the match.

Last month, Trump said at one of his rallies that if you want to stop the fires, "You've got to clean your forests. There are many, many years of leaves and broken trees and they're ... so flammable," [the BBC reported](#).

Tree debris isn't new, greenhouse gas levels are new

Yeah, those untidy plants have been making a mess [for about 370 million years](#) on earth. So, that's nothing new. But what's different is the historically recent exponential increase in the level of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. A rake isn't going to fix that.

Although the headlines today are focused on the West Coast, actually these fires have been a global phenomenon. Wildfires have burned large areas of our planet in

various continents with smoke drifting across oceans and exacerbating global warming.

According to Matt McGrath, environmental correspondent for BBC news, “While natural factors such as strong winds have helped the spread of these massive fires, the underlying heating of the climate from human activities is making these conflagrations bigger and more explosive.”

McGrath writes that nine of the ten warmest years on record have happened since 2005 and the United Nations had already warned that five years from 2016 would be the hottest ever recorded. This is why, he says, six of the 20 largest fires on record in California all occurred this year. In addition, a prolonged drought over the past decade has killed millions of trees, turning them into potent fuel for the fires.

“Climate scientists had forecast that western wildfires would grow in size, scale and impact — but their predictions are coming to fruition faster than expected,” writes McGrath.

Tens of thousands evacuated, but not prisoners

The North Complex Fire in northern California in the counties of Plumas and Butte, initially started by lightning on Aug. 17, 2020, is among the deadliest in history. So far, news reports say that ten bodies have been found and another 16 people are missing.

Last week, the [Los Angeles Times reported](#) that 20 people in California had died from the fires since Aug. 15. [BBC News reported](#) that tens of thousands of people are under evacuation orders in California as 14,800 firefighters continue to combat 28 major fires in the state.

However, the fires in California are not only threatening the lives of people whose homes are located near the flames, they are also a major concern for prisoners who

are recruited to fight the fires or who are incarcerated in prisons near them. [According to the New York Times](#), these firefighters are paid up to five dollars per day (that's right, per day!) with an extra one dollar per hour while fighting fires, as if their lives are the most expendable. The prisoner firefighters are highly trained to face the most hazardous conditions and are on the front lines of the fires.

And, if that doesn't kill them, then the exacerbation of the COVID-19 crisis, which already affects prisoners more than the general population due to overcrowding and no possible social distancing due to lack of space and sanitary equipment and items may. Prisoners are being either evacuated into already overcrowded prisons with no testing for the virus, or are at risk of burning to death because of a lack of evacuation planning with the necessary transportation required.

The New York Times article reports that in the northern California city of Vacaville, while volunteers rescued animals from the encroaching flames, thousands of people incarcerated in two prisons, some suffering from the coronavirus, were not moved, even while a nearby animal shelter just up the road from the prison complex was emptied. Fortunately, the winds were kind and the fire did not reach the California State Prison, Solano.

The COVID-19 crisis and prison transfers had already taken a toll at California's San Quentin State Prison before the fires, where 26 inmates died of the virus and more than 2,500 prisoners and staff members have been sickened since infected prisoners from a southern California prison were transferred to San Quentin in May without being tested.

The New York Times quotes Adnan Khan, who was previously incarcerated in California and now runs [Re:Store Justice](#), a criminal justice reform organization, spent three years at the prison in Solano. Last month, he spoke to a friend at the prison over the phone. "I got a call and honestly, man, I could literally hear people coughing in the background," he said. "I'm like, 'Is that COVID? What's going on?'"

My friend says, 'No, there's fires here.'"

Khan said his friend told him that corrections officers were walking into the building with ash on their hats and shoulders and that he didn't believe the prisoners would be safely evacuated. "Approximately 7,000 people in both prisons," he said. "And COVID. And buses. Where are you going to get all these buses from? Fire evacuations are relatively fast. You can't just take your time."

COVID-19 and fires a death sentence, release prisoners now

This is why the demand to release the prisoners from these overcrowded death traps is so important and should be elevated. Due to the pandemic and the fires, many prisoners have, in all practicality, had their sentences increased to the death penalty due to criminal neglect by the state and federal governments.

It is interesting that Gov. Gavin Newsom last Friday signed a bill allowing more inmates, who work as firefighters while serving their sentences, to get jobs with fire departments once they are released. The timing is interesting because the demand for that right, along with a real wage, not slave wages, has a long history. But now, the prisoner volunteer pool has been greatly reduced due to early releases or sickness due to COVID-19. So, they are in much greater demand to a state that relies so heavily on these "volunteers." Perhaps the governor had a change of heart, or felt the necessity to sweeten the pot.

The New York Times quoted a former prisoner at San Quentin, Mr. Stanley-Lockhart, reflecting on how this crisis affects prisoners already dealing with COVID-19 and who live in a country with the highest incarceration rates and long sentences: "It tends to attack your sense of hope," he said. "If COVID doesn't get us, the fires will get us. If the fires and COVID don't get us, we'll never be able to come out from underneath these sentences."

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report in 2018 suggested that keeping temperatures down to a certain critical level to avoid environmental catastrophe would require “rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society.”

As the COVID-19 crisis has shown, the U.S. under the system of capitalism is not only a threat to itself, but to the world. The U.S. is the leading contributor to global warming, far exceeding China in regards to emissions per population, and its rejection of the Paris Accords regarding the international fight against global warming and rejection of the World Health Organization during this pandemic once again shows the necessity of smashing capitalism for the sake of humanity.

A system that breeds racism and sexism, like the former prisoner said, is a recipe for killing hope. Imagine how many of those now fearing the fires behind prison walls could have been the scientists who help us cope with COVID or global warming. Systemic racism in the criminal justice system put them there and keeps them there and denies us their potential contributions. Just as sexism does the same. In fact, global warming was discovered three years prior to its “discovery” by a man. But, those findings weren’t taken seriously since it was the scientist Eunice Foote, a woman, who actually was the first to discover the relationship between greenhouse gases and atmospheric warming. So, we lost three years. Let’s not lose any more in this fight.

