

Maui: Deadliest U.S. fires in a century

written by Gregory E. Williams
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Ke'eaumoku Kapu — a Kanaka Maoli community leader and head of the Nā 'Aikāne o Maui Cultural Center — handing out supplies in a Lahaina Walgreens parking lot. The cultural center was destroyed in the fires.

The Aug. 8 wildfires that devastated parts of Maui are the deadliest in the U.S. since the 1918 Cloquet fire in northern Minnesota. Some two weeks after the fires, the official death toll stands at 115, and authorities in Hawaii have released the names of 388 people still unaccounted for. Tens of thousands have evacuated. Over 3,000 acres burned in Lahaina and neighboring communities.

Eighty percent of Lahaina burned. The town of 13,000 was called Lele in the Hawaiian language and was the capital of the Kingdom of Hawai'i from 1802-1812 and again from 1820-1845. Native Hawaiians have inhabited the islands for about 1,500 years. The U.S. imperialists annexed Hawaii in 1898.

Investigations into the causes of the fire are still ongoing, but, as [the Washington Post put it](#), “there is mounting evidence that Hawaiian Electric’s wind-damaged equipment sent sparks into the dry, overgrown vegetation surrounding its poles.”

Maui County is suing Hawaiian Electric, alleging that the power company negligently failed to shut off power despite high winds from category 4 storm Dora. The dangers produced by drought conditions combined with hurricane winds were not unforeseen. On Aug. 7, [Chevy Chevalier with KHON2 had written](#):

“Although Hurricane Dora is passing well to the south of the Big Island, it will still be able to help pack a good punch with strong winds over Hawaii with high pressure building to the north at the same time. It will be windy, especially Tuesday morning through the afternoon, but it will also be dry with humidity levels down to around 40%. This can be a dangerous combination to start and quickly spread wildfires.”

People's fightback needed, not conspiracy theories

In 2022, a United Nations team comprising 50 researchers from six continents [issued a report](#) on devastating fires worldwide. They estimate that the incidence of such fires could increase by up to 57% by the end of this century.

This summer - amid record temperatures - [Canada had its worst wildfire season on record](#). Over a third of the U.S. population was under air quality alerts because of the Canadian wildfires.

Clearly, increasingly devastating wildfires are emerging as a major component of the climate crisis and from profit-driven land-management practices. Working-class and oppressed people the world over are on the frontlines and need to band together to take on the fossil fuel companies, banks, governments, and military establishments (especially the Pentagon) driving the crisis. We need a movement demanding public ownership and peoples' democratic control of the utility companies; Hawaiian Electric is not the only private power company implicated in recent climate-related disasters. We need to stand behind indigenous communities and others affected by environmental racism.

What we don't need are conspiracy theories. Aside from stoking faux-outrage, these do nothing to empower people and disempower us by making it more difficult to organize a fightback against the rich and powerful people who are causing the crises. When we spread this type of disinformation, we do the work of the banks and corporate executives.

From the Satanic Panic playbook

Unfortunately, these conspiracy theories have been amplified by social media algorithms. For example, some influenced by the dangerous QAnon movement have claimed that the fires were started by shadowy "elites" to destroy evidence of underground tunnels where human trafficking occurs.

The idea of underground tunnels of this sort goes back at least to the 1980s with the outbreak of the “Satanic Panic” – a witch craze 2.0. The basis of Satanic Panic was the idea that there was a vast conspiracy of Devil worshipers ritually abusing and sacrificing children. The unsubstantiated claims were popularized through the 1980 book “Michelle Remembers,” written by a psychiatrist and his patient, whose memories of childhood Satanic abuse were “recovered” through hypnosis. That is to say, these were false memories implanted through the hypnosis process itself. The stories spread through daytime talk shows and tabloids.

Although no evidence of Satanic ritual abuse ever emerged, lives were destroyed. In Manhattan Beach, California, hundreds of children were interviewed during the McMartin preschool investigations and trial – likely traumatizing them in the process. They were questioned in leading and coercive ways, some even stating that they saw witches fly. Claims about tunnels entered into the investigations. Multiple excavations revealed only old structures and debris on the school property, no tunnels. Nobody was convicted in the 1987-1990 trials.

To return to the present situation in Lahaina, the claims about the intentional destruction of tunnels merely obscure the reality of climate change. For the social media figures benefitting from such conspiracy-mongering – as for fossil fuel CEOs – the name of the game is “anything but climate change,” no matter how outrageous.

Land grabs don't require sabotage

Another conspiracy theory circulating especially through right-wing media spheres is the claim that “elites” caused the fires intentionally – sometimes with lasers, as conspiracy theory influencers preposterously alleged about California wildfires [in 2018 and 2020](#) – in order to buy up land for low prices, effectively robbing residents.

In fact, residents of Lahaina have been receiving calls from real estate investors wanting to buy up their properties. But this is opportunism, not evidence of arson.

Where this writer lives in the New Orleans area, waves of gentrification followed hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. New Orleans was not intentionally flooded, but developers and others saw their opportunity. The storms displaced thousands of mainly Black, working-class New Orleanians, and many could not return because the government never funded a people's recovery. The rich and their politicians remade the city, demolishing public housing, replacing public schools with a mishmash of private and charter schools, and more.

Ruling-class offensives like that of post-Katrina New Orleans and potentially what is happening in Maui are likely to increase as climate change continues. We need to be prepared for this. But, again, we can only wage effective struggles when our analyses are based in fact. Conspiracy theorists co-opt the language of rebellion, but by sowing confusion and division, they prevent people from resisting and thereby aid the rich and powerful.

