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Racism and exploitation: Incarcerated firefighters and a burning city

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Incarcerated firefighters fight the Palisades fire on 10 January in Los Angeles, California.

The State of California boasts one of the highest minimum wages in the country at \$16.50 an hour **unless you're a prisoner**. The reality of pay beneath minimum wage is no different for the hundreds of incarcerated workers in California who have been pressed into service to combat the most destructive fires in Los Angeles County history. The fact that a measly \$16.50 still manages to be one of the best minimum wages in the 50 states is a topic for another day.

Since a series of fires have rolled through northwestern Los Angeles, including the Palisades and Eaton fires, local and state authorities have struggled to contain the

blaze as it advances towards the more densely populated city proper. In this desperation, the California Department of Corrections deployed over [900 incarcerated firefighters](#) to the front line against the deadly wildfires.

These incarcerated workers make a minimum of \$5.80 and a maximum of [\\$10.24](#) a day. Needless to say, an incarcerated firefighter's "day" is unlikely to be a standard eight-hour day. It is entirely common for firefighters to work 24-hour shifts.

Prison labor is used widely across the United States. Incarcerated workers produce roughly \$9 billion in services and \$2 billion in goods per year for an absolute pittance. There is nowhere in the country where incarcerated workers are entitled to minimum wage. This is all allowed under an exception to the 13th Amendment prohibition on slavery.

The LA fires have brought this issue back into the spotlight as hundreds of prisoners risk their lives for dollars a day performing menial and grueling work. According to [The Marshall Project](#), incarcerated firefighters generally work on "hand crews" using hand tools to clear vegetation and dig trenches to slow the spread of wildfires. The operation of fire hoses or the spreading of flame retardants is left to the professional firefighters, all while prison laborers swelter and struggle in the dirt.

The entire capitalist system is predicated on underpaying workers to maximize the ruling class's profits. This principle applies to workers in the public and private sectors. The ruling class is fanatically committed to as little state investment as possible in programs that benefit the general welfare and as much as possible in corporate tax breaks and militarized police forces. For this reason, incarcerated workers generally comprise 30% of California's firefighting force.

The job of a firefighter is an essential part of society. This job should be a public service that is equally funded, with workers fairly compensated and provided with health care. Not only do firefighters risk their lives to immediate danger without a

question, they are also exposed to invisible toxic chemicals that burn from the industrial waste capitalism produces. Incarcerated firefighters have no health care. [Cancer](#) is the leading cause of death for firefighters more generally.

In addition to the class oppression inherent in prison slave labor, the Los Angeles firefighting crisis highlights the racism at the heart of U.S. capitalism. Black and Latino people, mostly men, comprise 71% of California's prison population, but only 55% of the overall population. Only 5% of California's population is Black according to the 2020 U.S. Census; however, almost 30% of California's prisoners are Black. So when these prisoners are ordered into the field to dig a ditch ahead of an advancing fire, the chances are those are Black and Brown people facing hyper-exploitation and the hardest of labor - as is so often the case in this country.

Progressive Twitch Streamer [Hassan Piker](#) conducted an unfiltered interview with incarcerated firefighters on Jan. 11, as the fires burned high. "It's way better because if I was in the prison yard, I'm seeing guys get stabbed, get beat up, the cops treat us like shit, but here we get better treatment," he said. "They talk to us like humans. We got a job. We're underpaid, but we have a job. And then the community shows us all kinds of love. We never received that growing up."

The irony of these men and women who receive this training is that once they are released from prison, it is rare that they get hired as full-time firefighters due to their status as formerly incarcerated people. This country needs more firefighters, and they should be fairly compensated, not exploited.

During the LA fires, billionaire and former Republican mayoral candidate, Rick Caruso, hired privately contracted firefighters to protect his shopping mall in the Palisades. The mall, a prominent symbol of capitalism, remains relatively untouched. Meanwhile, the neighborhoods and schools in the surrounding area were consumed in flames. Caruso and other LA capitalists defend their choice to protect the mall where Angelinans work and congregate.

One central danger in this situation is a greater reliance on private contractors for the proliferation of public services and spaces. As public services are privatized, the quality of the service often plummets as profit takes the driver's seat. One can simply look to the aftermath of Texas's or Puerto Rico's privatized power grid as examples of the utter chaos ushered in by privatization.

The destruction and subsequent exploitation created by these fires provide strong arguments against capitalism. As long as an ultra-wealthy few direct the affairs of the U.S. working class, macabre scenarios akin to the incarcerated firefighters deployed around Los Angeles will continue to manifest.

For all these reasons, the Harriet Tubman Center for Social Justice in Los Angeles is demanding a full people's program to confront the fires, including a clear path to permanent employment for incarcerated firefighters and strong unions for all workers combating these fires.

Please see the Harriet Tubman Center's full program [here](#).

