

# Stop funding wars, start funding climate action

written by Scott Scheffer  
January 22, 2025



Denise Jones (left) and Adonis Jones visited the remains of their Altadena home, which was destroyed by the Eaton Fire.

Unprecedented twin infernos have devastated Los Angeles, with Pacific Palisades and Altadena bearing the brunt. The blazes – the city’s most destructive ever – have claimed 27 lives, left dozens missing, and turned 12,000 homes to ash. Early damage estimates stretch into the hundreds of billions. As of January 18, the full toll remains unclear.

A 2024 Yale study projects that the death toll, counting indirect deaths mostly from smoke inhalation, will be in the thousands. The study draws data from California wildfires over a period of 11 years up to and including the deadly 2018 Camp Fire that burned down the town of Paradise, Calif. Researchers say that 12,000 people likely died prematurely from smoke from that fire alone.

Pacific Palisades – a neighborhood on the stunning hillsides of the Santa Monica mountains – is reputed to be reserved for the fabulously rich. That is only half the truth. Among the ashes are the remains of five mobile home parks.

One of them would be considered the Beverly Hills of mobile home parks. But the other four are the residences of people who moved there long ago before the glitterati began moving in. They are working class.

Other working-class people have homes passed down from parents and grandparents who moved there when it was possible for people of modest income. There has also been a staggering loss of jobs for people who serviced the wealthier class, such as gardeners, housekeepers, and maintenance workers.

### **Impact on African American community**

Altadena was a rare community where African American residents had found a welcoming home during the great migration from the Jim Crow South. At its height in 1970, the Black population of Altadena was 30%. Even now, it is higher than the national average Black population at 18%.

Until this fire, statistics painted a picture of a prosperous community. Generational wealth, with home ownership double the national average for African American neighborhoods, was evident. However, the 1960s Civil Rights Movement forced the passage of the Fair Housing Act, which outlawed the practice of redlining.

Banks in most areas of the country evaded the law and continued racist discrimination in housing. But not Altadena. Homeownership is where most wealth is for working-class families. The loss from the fires in this beautiful community in the foothills of the Angeles Forest is a tragic setback for thousands of people.

### **Criminal acts of capitalism**

As soon as the scale of the crisis became apparent, news of all the failures and criminal acts of capitalism began to emerge online and on social media. State Farm, the largest property and casualty insurer in the U.S., had raked in \$104.2 billion in 2023, but three months before the fire, it began pulling out of “risky” markets, including Southern California, where it refused to renew many homeowners’ policies. A half dozen other insurance companies had already pulled out before this year.

News of the \$17 million cut to the LA Firefighters’ budget reemerged in the headlines too. The earlier wrangling over the city budget gave an increase to notoriously racist LAPD at the same time as cutting fire safety. The cuts forced the department to lay off civilian staff, including mechanics, and dozens of fire trucks sat idle in an LAFD parking lot as Altadena and Pacific Palisades burned.

### **Landlords are price gouging**

Activists in the LA Tenants Union put together a spreadsheet that lists hundreds of greedy landlords who are price gouging. It shows the already absurd costs of housing in LA that, in hundreds of cases, doubled or tripled as soon as the news of

the fires broke. Those landlords belong in jail. Gov. Gavin Newsom declared it illegal, but the record of California prosecuting price gougers, including landlords, after disasters is nil. It has never happened.

The fire in Pacific Palisades began at about 10:30 a.m. on Jan. 7. Despite warnings about the weather and the dry conditions, the city and county fire departments' response was less than in previous times of danger. The fire quickly overwhelmed their resources.

The first evacuation order was late, but thousands began evacuating anyway. Sunset Boulevard is the main route to the other Los Angeles neighborhoods. It became so clogged that people abandoned their cars and fled the flames on foot. Later, to bring in more fire equipment, bulldozers smashed cars out of the way.

The other major fire began in the evening near Eaton Canyon, quickly engulfing Altadena and parts of Pasadena. The winds were too violent for helicopters that were sent to drop water. Firefighters' command centers repeatedly relocated away from the flames. A nursing home housing 93 residents self-evacuated. Staff pushed patient's beds and wheelchairs into the parking lot to wait for rescue.

As of Jan. 18, the Eaton and Pacific Palisades fires are still burning. Firefighters are making progress on containment, having had their ranks bolstered by hundreds of prisoners being paid \$10.24 a day. Firefighters from the Navajo Nation, Mexico, and Canada are all helping. A brief respite from the fierce Santa Ana winds is giving them a window of opportunity as well, but the winds are expected to pick up again on Jan. 22, according to the meteorologists at the National Weather Service. Already, the fires have burned the largest urban area in California's history.

### **Climate change fuels unprecedented destruction**

Southern California is a fire-prone area, but the fires that began on Jan. 7 are

qualitatively different. Capitalist-induced climate change has set up disastrous fires in two ways.

Southern California's regular rainy and dry seasons did not occur in 2024. Instead, a historic, long, terrible drought was followed by heavy rains, which produced a lot of new vegetation. Then came eight months of virtually no rain, which dried the underbrush of chaparral and other plant life to massive amounts of tinder.

Under these conditions, a spark caused by anything can start a fire, and the hot, dry Santa Ana winds are a regular weather pattern that can make fires challenging to extinguish. This time, global warming intensified the winds, which generally can gust up to 70 miles an hour. They whipped through the mountain passes at speeds up to 100 miles an hour.

The monstrous winds blew hot embers for miles. They pushed the flames forward throughout Pacific Palisades and Altadena communities, creating the two worst wildfires in California in living memory.

Investigations are underway to determine what sparked the two major fires, as well as several others that were smaller. Evidence is being considered that smoldering embers from a previous fire set off by New Year's Eve fireworks reignited in the neighborhood called the Highlands of Pacific Palisades.

### **Electrical equipment explosions**

Witnesses, videos, and photos show sparks and the sounds of explosions near electrical equipment in the hills above Altadena. Southern California Edison owns the equipment, but officials won't definitively say they are at fault.

Altadena residents have launched lawsuits. Attorneys for Evangeline Iglesias, who lost her home, asked a judge to order SCE to preserve evidence, citing the possibility of a coverup.

Out of 20 California wildfires since the turn of the century, eight were proven to be caused by faulty electrical equipment or power lines being broken from towers during high winds. This problem could be mitigated by burying power lines.

Many power lines in Europe are “undergrounded.” SCE says it is working on an “undergrounding” project. The company says the cost of \$1-3 million per mile presents difficulties, and the project is moving at a snail’s pace. Their parent company, Edison International, has a market capitalization of about \$24 billion. The cables *are* buried in the wealthiest part of Pacific Palisades, the Highlands, but not anywhere in Altadena.

Attorney Ben Crump, the attorney for the family of George Floyd and for many other civil rights cases, is representing the family of retired pharmacy technician Erlene Kelly, who perished in the Eaton Fire in the first wrongful death suit against SCE.

### **Demanding reparations from Big Oil**

Another group of Altadena fire survivors held a press conference to pressure the state for legislation that would demand reparations from Big Oil. Resident Sam James was [quoted in the Guardian](#) when she spoke about the loss of her grandfather’s home and the overall loss of Black families’ generational wealth. James said, “It should not continuously fall on us to address the consequences of big oil’s negligence! They must take responsibility for the harm that they’ve caused, pay reparations to the affected communities who lost their homes and businesses, and take immediate steps to mitigate further damage.”

### **A global crisis**

This tragic episode for Los Angeles is a microcosm of the global crisis of climate change. Huge capitalist corporations continue to drill and frack for oil and gas even with all the crises, death, and destruction caused by the heated atmosphere. Like the

residents of Altadena, Global South countries have to fight the U.S. and other big imperialist countries for reparations in the form of the Loss and Damage fund created at the UN's series of annual climate conferences.

The Biden administration's flagship legislation was supposed to address climate change. It was a staggering amount of money - more than \$800 billion - earmarked for mitigation and adaptation. But still not enough.

Furthermore, much of it was directed toward projects that enable rather than phase out fossil fuel exploitation. On the first day of his second term in office, Trump withdrew from the 2015 Paris Agreement.

According to Britain's Met Office, 2024, the hottest year on record, also saw the most significant spike in CO2 emissions ever recorded and has already surpassed the goal of 1.5 set in Paris in 2015 for the first time. The Met's report says that a drastic reduction in fossil fuels must happen soon to get back on track.

Surpassing the threshold in one year doesn't mean the goal can't still be met. However, much more needs to be invested in research and development to meet the planet's growing energy needs and eliminate fossil fuels.

A first step toward real funding would be to halt all spending for the Pentagon, stop funding wars and genocide, end all U.S. weapons production, and end all U.S.-led military alliances that menace the world. Studies have shown that the annual spending for all of that is somewhere near \$2.5 trillion. There is another \$6.9 trillion - more than the GDP of all but two countries in the world - being held by non-banking U.S. firms.

All this money has been stolen from the labor of the worldwide working class. It's time to take it back and use it for the future of the planet and all of humanity.

