



# Speak Out Now

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## Los Angeles Fires: Their System Cannot Protect Us

The massive fires ripping across Los Angeles have brought unprecedented levels of destruction. At least 24 people are dead, and more than 12,000 structures have been destroyed, from homes, and businesses, to schools, apartment buildings, and vehicles. About 200,000 people are under evacuation orders in Los Angeles County. The total damage so far has been over \$150 billion.

The enormous speed and scale of the destruction from these fires has been horrifying. But these conditions did not come out of nowhere, and fires of this scale are becoming increasingly common. The majority of the most destructive wildfires in California have all happened within the past ten years.

The continued warming of the planet caused by the burning of fossil fuels has created the perfect storm of conditions for enormous fires like these. Los Angeles has faced a record long drought. The disruption of the climate has also led to intense winds and extreme weather. Fire season in California in the past was restricted to summer months. But these are massive fires that are happening during winter — it's always fire season now.

And even though all of this is well known and understood by elected officials, nothing has been done to prevent fires of this scale, nor to prepare to respond to them when they do happen. Even though Pacific Palisades is home to many of the richest people in Los Angeles, firefighters were completely overwhelmed. The powerful winds were able to send embers over a mile away, spreading the fire too quickly for firefighters to respond adequately. And because of the high winds, helicopters could not fly to drop water. At the same time, the water demand became so great that 20% of the fire hydrants went dry within the first hours of fighting the Palisades fire. So much water was used that the tanks supplying the hydrants couldn't be refilled fast enough. The entire firefighting infrastructure has not been equipped to fight fires of this scale.

Instead of increasing funding to Los Angeles fire departments, across the state and throughout the country, fire departments are losing funding, and closing fire stations. The Los Angeles Fire Department's budget was

cut by \$17.6 million in June of last year, despite firefighters getting salary increases. Fire departments are so understaffed in California that about 1,000 prisoners trained as firefighters are being used to fight these fires, only earning one dollar per hour or less. About 400 National Guard members have been deployed to help with road closures and other problems. Firefighters have recently come from Canada and Mexico. And still the fires continue to spread, and the wind is picking up again.

At the same time, some wealthy individuals even hired their own private firefighters to protect their properties. As much of the central business district of Pacific Palisades burned to the ground, Palisades Village — an upscale outdoor mall owned by the billionaire developer Rick Caruso — survived because Caruso hired a group of private firefighters to protect his property.

Fires of this scale have become so destructive and so common that insurance companies have stopped offering fire insurance. Insurance companies canceled over 1,600 fire insurance policies in Pacific Palisades this year in July. And it is not just the wealthy that have lost their homes. Many working-class families have been hit by these fires too. And where will they go now after losing everything?

At every level, we see a total and complete failure of this system to keep people safe from this destruction. The conditions that fuel these firestorms are only getting worse. 2023 set the record for the most amount of carbon released into the atmosphere in a single year, further accelerating the climate crisis. Instead of building up firefighting infrastructure, it continues to be cut back by city and state governments. It doesn't matter whether it is a Democratic or Republican administration, nothing is being done to prevent or adequately respond to these horrible disasters.

What's really responsible for entire neighborhoods of Los Angeles being burned to the ground is an entire system that has no regard for human life and cannot keep us safe. So long as we continue to live under a system that values profit more than human life, all of our lives will continue to be put at risk. Our lives are more important than their profits.