

WOOD STREET COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER

Fire rages across the West Coast, evictions on the horizon



RECORD WILDFIRE SEASON

Over the past month and a half, the West Coast of the United States including California, Oregon, and Washington have been ravaged by fires. In California alone, the recent fires have destroyed over 3.2 million acres, an area almost the size of Connecticut. While many of these fires have been mostly contained at this point, this fire season has been the most destructive in California history. The pollution of the air, destruction of wildlife and their habitats, and the toll on human life is difficult to fathom. A hard truth to face is that these fires will continue to worsen in the coming years as long as the capitalist system remains intact. This system functions on the backs of poor working class people and has systematically forced us down a path of global destruction. With the quickening advancement of climate change, environmental conditions are ripe for fires and the people in power are unwilling to take the necessary steps to reverse our course towards global destruction. The people must come together to overthrow the capitalist system and establish a new one that serves the interests of the people.

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RECORD WILDFIRE SEASON (CONTINUED)

The fires of the last twenty years have been disastrous for California. Nine of the ten largest wildfires in California history have happened since the year 2000. From 2001-2010, wildfires decimated 7.03 million acres in California alone. In the past decade, wildfires destroyed 10.8 million acres with a third of the destruction occurring this year. Even though the air quality in areas of California sporadically improves, the fires are still raging as most of them remain less than a third contained. As climate change advances and the earth grows warmer, we will suffer drier conditions, higher temperatures, and greater chances of dry lightning. All of which lead to more fires. The consequences of these fires are faced primarily by the poorest and most vulnerable in our society. People who are homeless, workers, have an unstable living situation, or unable to afford the cost of uprooting their lives to evacuate and follow publicly mandated safety guidelines are forced to suffer the most severe financial and health challenges as a result of these fires. Coupled with the challenges faced in the Coronavirus Pandemic, the situation for working class people in California is extremely dire.

The fires have a tremendously dangerous impact on human health. Homeless people are at the highest risk of negative health effects due to their already precarious living conditions. Being homeless or living on the verge of homelessness makes it difficult to properly protect oneself from the intense air pollution caused by the fires. One of the primary health guidelines to prevent respiratory damage from the smoke is to stay inside. However, if you are constantly moving around from house to house or living on the streets, then there is no real escape from the smoke. Homeless folks already are generally at greater risk due to the fact that the rates of respiratory conditions and lung diseases such as asthma, chronic bronchitis, and emphysema (a lung disease making it difficult to breathe) are double that of the general population. These pre-existing health conditions are made even more dangerous in the time of the Coronavirus Pandemic, which is a respiratory disease. Despite hellfire and a global pandemic, the government continues to evict homeless people from where they reside, putting them at further risk of exposure to smoke pollution and infection.



RECORD WILDFIRE SEASON (CONTINUED)

In Santa Rosa during the first week of September, as fires were raging throughout the West Coast and smoke polluted the air, over 100 homeless people were evicted by police from an encampment near the Downtown area despite guidelines from the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention stating that people should be allowed to remain where they are if they do not have individual housing options, to prevent the spread of coronavirus. Even before the wildfires, homeless people in California were burdened by cuts to social services and limited access to resources such as public bathrooms and shelters due to sanitation and social distancing guidelines. Many local governments have already obtained the resources to house people temporarily either within hotel rooms or emergency shelters, but they outright refuse to do so. This is evidence that shows how little the government cares about the well-being of homeless people.



Many migrant farmworkers are forced to work during wildfires and are constantly put in positions that put themselves and their loved ones into dangerous situations

Many who rent or own homes have also been negatively impacted by the fires. In Oregon, approximately 500,000 people who were in the path of large fires were evacuated. That is roughly 10% of the total population of Oregon – a staggering number. Hundreds of homes were destroyed, and many were forced to flee at the last minute, having to leave many of their belongings behind. This can be a crippling economic burden as the cost to drive off and stay at a hotel or travel a long distance can add up. Given that 78% of workers in the United States live paycheck to paycheck, a sudden expense and loss of work can mean being unable to pay rent and being forced to couch surf or live on the street. While evacuating your home and losing work and money is preferable to burning to death, there are many who are still forced to labor in smoke-filled air.

Farm workers are forced to be exposed to unhealthy air quality from the fires. Harvesting crops is some of the hardest work in any industry and primarily Central and South American immigrant farmers have been forced to labor in unhealthy conditions. As some workers are instructed by the state to stay home and out of the smoke, in Sonoma county in particular, where fires and smoke have been prevalent, local agricultural commissioners have worked in tandem with winery owners to create exceptions for farm workers who are harvesting in wildfire-evacuation zones. Some may have the idea that farm workers should be grateful for being able to still work during the fires. This is the logic of capitalism. Why should people be thankful for being forced to work outside despite not only unhealthy air quality, but also a global pandemic because they have to pay their bills?

RECORD WILDFIRE SEASON (CONTINUED)

Firefighters also take on a major risk being on the frontlines of controlling the fires and the state has been quick to deploy cheap prison labor to do this work. Historically during wildfire season, the state of California exploits prisoner labor in the California Penal System to combat these wildfires. These prisoners are often paid anywhere between \$2.90 and \$5.12 a day and are often tasked with some of the most difficult work combatting the various fires across the state. Across the United States, coronavirus has infected over 110,000 inmates and correctional officers and killed 825 people. Due to the government's lack of response to the coronavirus, within California prisons only around 1,306 inmates are deployed out of the total 3,400 inmate firefighters due to the state's refusal to keep those in the penal system safe from the coronavirus. Although the state granted 17,600 prisoners early release in order to curb the spread of the virus, it has also had a policy of transferring prisoners from facilities that have had an outbreak to other facilities without testing inmates which has undoubtedly worsened the spread of the virus within the California Penal System. This has led to the state requesting assistance from firefighters from the East Coast of the United States and as far as Australia.

The state's dependence on prison labor to deal with the wildfires has undoubtedly exacerbated this already terrible fire season since they force the very people they depend on to deal with these fires to live in inhumane conditions. The situation for migrant and prison laborers is always dire under capitalism. Their exploitation is necessary for the system to function. The fires only allow us to see how this exploitation is heightened in times of crisis.



Politicians and state and federal governments act as if they do all they can to prevent and control these fires through legislation, awareness raising, and electoral campaigning, but voting and piecemeal reforms are nowhere near enough. Leaders like California Governor Gavin Newsom point at climate change as the root cause of these fires and push for "green policies" such as decarbonizing the economy. Newsom also places blame on Donald Trump and others in the Republican Party who deny climate change is real and hold green efforts back, advocating that we need to get out and vote for the Democratic Party. But even if some in the Democratic Party admit that climate change is real and extremely dangerous, the reality is that the systemic plunder of natural resources, wastefulness, and disregard for life that is characteristic of the capitalist system is carried out by both Democrats and Republicans – the parties of the ruling class. Without a movement that struggles to overthrow the ruling class and establish a system that works to meet the needs of all people while prioritizing the health of the planet, the California fires and climate change more broadly will continue on this trend of exacerbation until all life on earth ceases to exist. To better grasp this reality, it is helpful to review the situation with the fires and the harm they cause to poor and working class people.

RECORD WILDFIRE SEASON (CONTINUED)



We cannot view these fires as isolated incidents. It is important to recognize a large reason why they are happening is due to drastic climate change brought on by the extraction, production, and consumption of fossil fuels and other resources by corporations and the government in the capitalist system. 100 companies account for 71% of the world's carbon emissions. The U.S. military alone has a carbon footprint greater than 140 countries combined. Instead of holding the primary polluters of the world to task and struggling to overthrow them, the ruling class pushes onto people the idea that individuals need to reduce their own carbon footprint through driving less, conserving electricity at home, and recycling. While these are reasonable practices for people to take on, by themselves they will do little to nothing to end or even slow climate change.

The emphasis on an individualist approach to stopping climate change is a covert tactic by the ruling class to discourage collective action by the masses of people who will bear the brunt of the devastation brought on by climate change. We must not remain isolated from each other if we wish to save ourselves and the planet. We also cannot wait for politicians, CEOs, or scientific innovation to save us. These forces only seek to profit off green energy tactics while undermining the fact that climate change is here, and the billions of poor people who make up the majority of this world are already facing the consequences. We must act now because waiting for the perfect moment to act will mean that we will not act at all. We need to create new organizations that are able to expose the connection between oncoming climate catastrophe and capitalism, but take disciplined militant action against it in order to slow its destructive march forward. The barriers that separate issues need to be broken down as well. We cannot view the struggles of workers, immigrants, the incarcerated, and the poor as isolated. The fires have exposed the capitalist system as a whole which thrives on the exploitation of all working-class people.

It is easy to feel overwhelmed in the face of the Coronavirus Pandemic, massive fires, and climate change. But we must avoid nihilism and come together to strategize and build a movement to save the lives of ourselves, our loved ones, and future generations. Life does not have to be dictated by this rotten system. A better world is possible. We need to work collectively to build it together.

HOTELS NOT GRAVES?

In the middle of another record setting fire season, people living on the streets must not only contend with the spread of COVID-19 but unbreathable and toxic air. The government has done next to nothing with its huge budget and extensive resources and recent charity efforts in no way serve as a way to fill the tremendous gap. The city of Oakland and the state of California have consistently demonstrated little desire to support people experiencing homelessness. This is because it is not in the government's interest to actually provide or support the people, but rather uphold the interests of capital. This contradiction has been exemplified by recent programs intended to place homeless people into hotels.

At the beginning of the pandemic, state and local officials redirected funds to rent hotels (now vacant due to shelter in place orders) to house homeless people and potentially stall the spread of COVID-19. However, across the Bay Area, local governments have been slow to actually place people in these rooms. The city of Oakland has only housed a few hundred people after almost seven months! San Francisco has not performed much better. Although the city commandeered over 8,000 hotel rooms, three months into the pandemic only 37% of the rooms were filled.

At the same time, the state is still carrying out eviction and homeless sweeps! In late June 2020, during a global pandemic, CalTrans tried to evict residents in an attempt to push everyone into a cramped corner of Wood Street. This violence is not confined to homeless encampments as evidenced by recent unlawful evictions in West Oakland housing projects. The UFAD stands in its commitment to fight for working people as the government is continuing to exploit them and put them at greater risk of infection.



Hotels would rather shutter their doors instead of providing a safe haven during times of crisis



Places like the Wood Street Community are the "last stop" for many working people before they get displaced from Oakland altogether. It is imperative that we find ways to work together to fight back!

HOTELS NOT GRAVES? (CONTINUED)

In an attempt to augment the state's paltry efforts, several Bay Area organizations have banded together to house the homeless with their own funds. However, these programs are not a solution for this exploitative system. These programs simply cannot provide for all those who need shelter. For example, the East Oakland Collective, Love and Justice in the Streets and the Village have established the "Hotels not Graves" campaign in an attempt to shelter people in hotels. After almost seven months, this program has housed only forty-five people. These fundraising efforts will in no way come close to putting all vulnerable people into even a temporary hotel room. Furthermore, this whole strategy just accepts the inevitability of having to live in this capitalist system. In almost every American city, there are more vacant homes than homeless people! For real estate interests it is more profitable to leave property vacant (in the hopes they will rise in value in the future) than donate these properties to the public good. The only way to affect change is to end the system that leaves people so vulnerable. Only then would all vacant housing be made to shelter all people. This system allows housing to be a commodity controlled by giant real estate companies pursuing profits over actually housing all people.

While the "Hotels not Graves" campaign and government programs have materially improved the lives of a select few, most people will continue to be left with nothing as these crises develop. Only by confronting these oppressors can we end this suffering and exploitation. The government's bungling of the hotels initiative is just many ways it has neglected working people. Another example is the failures to open any "clean air respite centers" as millions of acres burn across the west coast. The California wildfire season is raging and whole swathes of the state are battling massive fires and poor air quality. These episodes are growing in regularity and intensity. In the face of all that, local governments are slow to open respite centers for folks on the street. In Oakland, city officials waited 25 days after the initial announcement of the poor air quality before opening a single respite center. One respite center at the 81st Street Public Library even closed early, not because people wanted to keep breathing toxic air, but because the city didn't mobilize anyone to actually get folks indoors.

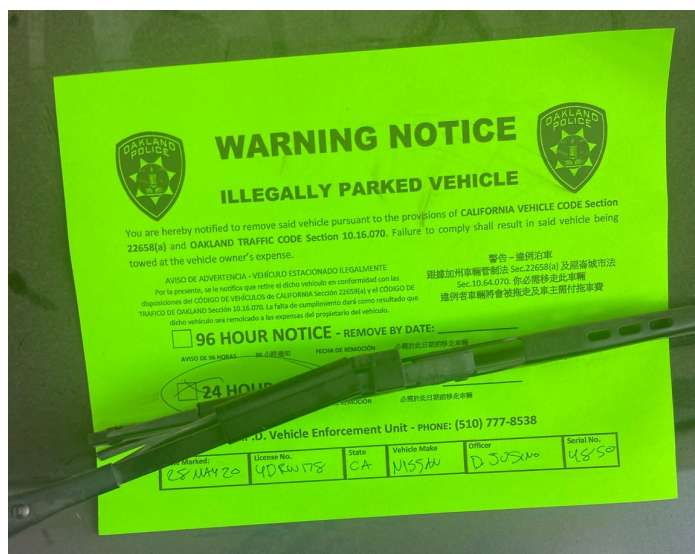
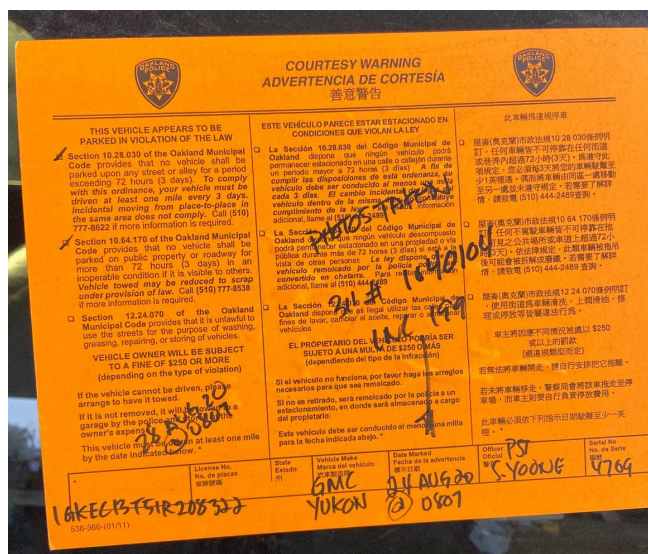
But why do these situations even exist in the first place? Because the state and the big businesses are the ones that have pushed millions out of their homes onto the street. The State has failed to halt the spread of the corona virus across the country. This pandemic has infected millions in the US and left over 200,000 people dead.. These same oppressors are the ones who contribute most to climate change which exacerbates the conditions during fire season. And these same oppressors hoard wealth for themselves while working people are in desperate need of resources. We must work to expose the shortcomings of these so-called "relief programs" and we must come together to oppose the exploitation of the people by the state. Only the working people can build a world where everyone is sheltered.

WHAT DO TOW TAGS REALLY MEAN?

Vehicles on Wood Street and at other encampments are regularly tagged by the Oakland Police Department. The lime green 8.5" x 11" sticker marks a vehicle as being "abandoned, wrecked, dismantled or inoperative" and as a "blight" or "public safety hazard". Green tags give a 10 day notice, orange tags a 3 day notice, and red tags a 24 hour notice. But why are vehicles tagged, and what is the real goal of these tags?

Homelessness is seen first and foremost to property developers, city officials, Caltrans, etc. as making property less desirable, negatively impacting land value. The problem of "blight" has a long history of figuring into urban renewal schemes, where the ways that poverty visibly appears, not its root causes, are what concern developers and their cronies. The impoverishment and exploitation of the working class is necessary for them to generate profit, so instead of resolving the conditions that lead to homelessness, developers hope to obscure them by displacing working people and redeveloping neighborhoods to appeal to more wealthy clientele.

When tags are posted claiming that a vehicle poses a public safety hazard, we have to read between the lines. If the health and safety of people living in encampments was the primary concern, the logical solution would be to first ensure that its residents are able to move into permanent and safe housing, instead of continuing to live in the same hazardous conditions, somewhere else. However, the interest of the developers is in increasing their profits, and it is far more profitable to develop real estate which can be bought and sold by the highest bidder. If an area is deemed unsafe, it drags down the value of the surrounding property, and so the developers are primarily concerned with "cleaning up" the area, i.e., kicking out poor people who are forcibly subjected to these living conditions in the first place. In the eyes of the developer, it's not a problem that people are forced to live in camps, but it is a problem when particular camps are hurting their bottom line.



WHAT DO TOW TAGS REALLY MEAN? (CONTINUED)

How can people resist when their vehicles are tagged?

When attempting to displace people, the Oakland Public Works Department, pigs, city officials, etc. depend on the fact that people will be isolated and resigned, allowing them to easily push people around as individuals. But when people get together with their neighbors and refuse to leave, it's a lot harder to push people around. We saw this in June when Caltrans tagged all vehicles under the overpass south of West Grand. When Caltrans caught wind that organizers were planning to do an eviction defense, they toned down their original plan and only one person was forced to move.

However, for people living in encampments, working together with neighbors is often more difficult than it sounds, because people can struggle to find common ground even with people living in the same area as them. This isn't always unfounded. Poverty and the conditions that people are forced to live in can put a real strain on people's mental and emotional states and affect people's behaviors. Sometimes people steal from each other, get into fights, hoard trash, and in general do not treat each other with respect. In light of these dynamics, it can be a real challenge to find a sense of solidarity with one's neighbors.

Despite this, all working people have at least one thing in common: We share a common interest in resisting oppression and exploitation. This is a collective interest, which often contradicts people's individual interests in ensuring their survival when it comes at the expense of others. Our society promotes individualism—the idea that people should only look out for themselves—and the ruling class knows it is easier to exploit and displace working people as individuals, and pits working people against each other.

Our shared interest means we have to unite with each other as much as possible in resisting attacks against the working class. It is not easy, and we have seen that when the state's power is threatened, it responds with repression and violence carried out by pigs on Wood Street and especially in the recent national protests against the police. But if we can find ways to squash beef with neighbors, develop a sense of duty to each other, and identify who are the *real* enemies of working people and how we can fight back against them, we will be much stronger. This basic form of solidarity is essential to building communal resistance to gentrification and the criminalization of homelessness.

What can you do if your vehicle gets tagged?

Talk to your neighbors. See if their vehicles were also tagged, ask them what they plan to do, and if they have a place to go. Encourage them to stay and resist displacement together, because people are always stronger together. Call the UFAD at 510-815-9978. The UFAD will try to mobilize as many people as possible to help resist an eviction. We have had multiple successful eviction defenses where Wood Street residents and activists have come together to stop people from being moved.

BACK RENT AND THE COMING EVICTION CRISIS

The COVID-19 pandemic has undeniably hit working people the hardest. Over 50 million people have lost their jobs since March, with the service, hospitality and commercial sectors being hit the hardest. Many of these people have not and likely will not regain employment in the near future. As a result, thousands of working class people have been forced to choose between paying rent and buying groceries. Landlords are still demanding payments despite the international recession and back rent has been piling up for months for households across the country. As a means of addressing this situation, many municipalities have adopted moratoriums on evictions. However, this period of leniency was built with an expiration date. These moratoriums were never meant to solve this issue but to delay the fall out of this crisis. The country has been rocked by demonstrations all summer and this moratorium is in part meant to prevent further popular unrest. Roughly half a year into the pandemic, we are seeing working class people saddled with new debts and evictions are already underway. We are seeing one of the greatest displacement catastrophes of the modern age unfolding right before our eyes. The people have to come together and take collective action. Tenants have no real protection if they don't organize against landlords and developers. This means coming together to prevent their neighbors from getting thrown out of their homes!

While eviction courts had been shut down temporary eviction moratoriums were in place at the onset of the pandemic. But these restrictions have not completely halted evictions during the shutdown. As states reopen, landlords, who live off the labor of others in the form of collecting rent, begin moving on evictions. As of September 2020, over 30 states do not currently have state-wide eviction protections, and have begun carrying out eviction hearings. The greater landscape is a patchwork of different criteria for limited protections and nationwide US renters owe \$21.5 billion in back-rent. In a study based on predicted job and wage loss, the Aspen Institute and the COVID-19 Eviction Defense Project projected that 20 to 30 million renters in the United States are at risk of eviction through the end of 2020, representing up to 21% of renter households.



Despite California's eviction "protection" many tenants may still face the threat of eviction in the coming months

In response, on August 31, 2020 Gov. Newsom signed AB 3088, which bans evictions of tenants who can't pay rent due to COVID hardships until February 1, 2021. If the COVID hardship occurs between September 1, 2020 and January 31, 2021, tenants must pay at least 25% of rent due to avoid eviction. This is simply not enough and we cannot accept this false "solution". These measures regarding housing protections (or lack thereof) during the COVID 19 pandemic are projected to cause lasting harm to families and individuals, further destabilization of the housing market, and causing extreme disruption to communities nationwide. The State has let all this happen because they are not looking out for the people but the landlords! The strongest eviction protections are on commercial properties and even the federal stimulus was mostly delegated to businesses interests, with the average person receiving just a single payment of \$1200.

BACK RENT AND THE COMING EVICTION CRISIS (CONTINUED)

Millions of people, including children and elderly folks will undoubtedly become homeless across this country, giving way to the ripples of displacement Oakland residents are far too familiar with — increased health impacts, hunger, illegal dumping and far worse consequences. This is all happening while the pandemic is still in full thrust. While the government is working to ensure that the big businesses are secure, its on the people to unite against this crisis. We must work together by forming tenants unions, holding community meetings, and undermining the developers and local officials as they attempt to further displace working class people and gentrify cities across the country. These associations can be a means for people to withhold rent not just because they can't afford to pay, but for a whole host of reasons: out of solidarity with folks who aren't able to pay rent; because a building is poorly maintained, full of pests, lacks basic amenities; because the property owner is involved in various schemes to displace residents.

Submissions:

The West Oakland Community Newsletter is a collaborative project by the United Front Against Displacement (UFAD) & the Wood St. Community, in an effort to spread news about the neighborhood and the struggle against the pigs & developers.

If you would like to submit something, see something added to the next newsletter, or if there is something we got wrong, LET US KNOW!

Find someone on outreach, shoot us an email [wewontgo@riseup.net], or call/text (510) 815-9978



**General meetings, outreach,
and community dinners
happen weekly.**

General meetings:

Wednesday, August 5th

Outreach:

Please contact us via email for exact time
and location.

Community dinners:

Wednesday, August 12th

Wednesday, August 26th

**A Publication of the
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