Wildfires devastate Native Hawaiian lands

By Will Hodgkinson

This week, wildfires are devastating Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) lands in U.S.-occupied Hawai‘i. The largest fires have erupted on Hawai‘i and Maui, Hawai‘i’s two largest islands, burning over 2,000 acres. As of this article’s publication, 99 people are confirmed dead. At least 1,000 other people remain unaccounted for, and authorities expect the death toll to rise.

Many residents had no warning of the fires and had to flee into the ocean, where they waited for hours until rescue came. In all, over 11,000 residents have evacuated. These wildfires are the deadliest recorded on a U.S.-claimed territory in over a century. (New York Times, Aug 12)

Lāhainā, the capital of the Kingdom of Hawai‘i — which was invaded and violently overthrown by the U.S. in 1893 — is experiencing the greatest devastation, with 2,200 structures destroyed. (Aug. 27, 2015) That flooding, mainly in the Ninth Ward, a predominant working-class Black neighborhood in New Orleans, is estimated to be over $1 billion in structural damage, leading to more than one million people being displaced, many permanently, especially the poor and people of color.

According to livescience.com, an estimated 1,833 people died in the hurricane and the flooding that followed. (Aug. 27, 2015) That flooding, mainly caused by broken levees, overwhelmed the Ninth Ward, a predominantly working-class Black neighborhood in New Orleans. Over 1,000 people died from flooding in this neighborhood alone.

Fast forward almost 18 years later to Aug. 9, when tragic wildfires swiftly devastated huge swaths of the Hawaiian island of Maui, including the historic town of Lāhainā. At least 99 people have died and the death toll is expected to rise even higher. The structural damage for residents is estimated to be over $1 billion with the destruction of over 2,000 buildings.

There were no sirens to warn people before the rapidity of the wildfires as many people died from being burned alive, smoke inhalation and general lack of escape routes. DNA findings are now being required to identify many of the victims.

While no source of the fires has been officially determined, one possibility was the dangerous active power lines and other supplies to survivors. “There is no government agency helping us. This is our home, our community,” said Jareth Lumlung, a Kānaka Maoli volunteer leading these relief efforts. (tinyurl.com/4kwkfpt7)

Summer Smith ¡presente!

Workers World Party mourns the tragic loss of Summer Smith, a founding member of the Salt Lake City, Utah, branch of WWP, who died from a long, heroic battle with cancer on Aug. 10. She was 41 years old. Summer was a single mother, a teacher and union activist.

An obituary in tribute to Summer Smith will appear in a future WW. Rest in power, Comrade Summer.

– Workers World newspaper staff

Environmental racism links Lāhainā and Katrina

By Monica Moorehead

August 29 will mark the 18th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, one of the deadliest hurricanes in U.S. history, which devastated much of the Gulf Coast (specifically Louisiana and Mississippi) and disproportionately struck New Orleans. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration states that this Category 4 hurricane caused at least $65 billion in structural damage, leading to more than one million people being displaced, many permanently, especially the poor and people of color.

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While no source of the fires has been officially determined, one possibility was the dangerous active power lines combined with high mountain winds emanating from Hurricane Dora, a Category 4 storm located to the south of Maui in the Pacific Ocean.

Katrina and the Hawaiian wildfires have more in common than not. Both were impacted by climate change, which has grown dramatically worse between 2005 and 2023. Regarding the potential impact of Katrina, Kerry Emanuel, Professor of Atmospheric Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, stated in the scientific journal Nature in early August 2005, that “North Atlantic hurricane power was strongly correlated with the temperature of the tropical
No more weapons to Kiev

As if Washington had not exported enough misery to Eastern Europe — no, to all of Europe and Russia — in the past two years, the Biden administration has asked Congress for another $84 billion in aid for Ukraine this August. This is on top of $813 billion already approved. Most of the money is for arms and military training. To attract broader support, Biden has linked the war money to funds for emergency relief and border security in the U.S.

Biden has reason to worry about getting approval. This worry goes beyond the visceral rejection of anything to do with Biden by ultra-right Republicans who never met a warplane they didn’t like. A CNN poll published Aug. 4 showed 55% of the respondents opposing more aid to Ukraine. Even more telling, about 80% of those polled believe the war will drag on indefinitely.

This disgust with the war has arisen despite the overwhelming propaganda falsely presenting the Kiev regime as a bulwark of democracy and courage. This is true even with few U.S. troops coming home in body bags, and none officially. This poll foretells an upswing in opposition should the war continue to drag on or to escalate. Perhaps workers in the U.S., who have no real interest in defending Kiev, in expanding NATO or in demonizing Vladimir Putin, let alone provoking Russia, are catching on to Washington’s plans for Ukraine.

If they read between the lines, even in the corporate media’s war reports, they might decide that the vaunted Ukrainian “counteroffensive” has flopped and that corruption haunts the Kiev regime’s state structure from top arms dealer — who made billions of dollars disappear — to the military recruiters who accept bribes to excuse individuals from conscription. War bloggers argue that weapons sent from NATO’s stocks soon go missing, many quickly destroyed by Russian artillery and missiles. For the merchants of death in the U.S. — that is, the owners of the military-industrial complex — this is happy news. This war is a perpetual market for their goods. For the working class in the U.S. and the other NATO countries, it’s a perpetual burden.

The sniff of defeat in Kiev has reached across the sea. Rot stinks. A handful of rich are getting richer on the misery of a war. And this war, as we have shown in articles over the past 20 months, has been provoked by NATO’s eastward expansion. The antiraw movement in the United States must demand: No more funds for war in Ukraine!
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From page 1

Atlantic during hurricane season, and that both had been increasing rapidly over the previous 30 years or so. It attributed these increases to a combination of natural climate oscillations and to global warming.

Before the recent wildfires, Maui had already been suffering from a combination of a severe drought and high humidity, deadly precursors to wildfires.

Hurricane Katrina and the Maui wildfires have something else in common: They are both social disasters that expose historical and present-day issues of racism and national oppression that permeate every aspect of U.S. society.

Is it surprising that Native Hawaiians reported that the local government did next to nothing to help? It did nothing to help evacuate people before the wildfires and provided little aid in the aftermath of the destruction.

Is it surprising that thousands of people were unable to escape Hurricane Katrina days before it landed due to unpreparedness by various levels of government — local, state and federal?

The lack of response in Hawai’i is similar to what happened during Katrina when the Federal Emergency Management Agency rightfully came under heavy fire for its lack of aid for the most marginalized people, especially in the Black community.

The Indigenous people in Hawai’i and the Black population both constitute internal nationally oppressed populations who have been historically occupied, exploited and repressed by white supremacy for centuries.

Hawai’i was colonized by the U.S. in 1893 before it became a U.S. state in 1959. Hawaiian lands are now dominated by at least 14 U.S. military bases and thousands of acres have been privatized by billionaires.

Black people were enslaved starting in 1619 and are still denied full democratic rights.

Both groupings deserve reparations as a result of all forms of institutionalized discrimination including environmental racism.

Marxism, Reparations & the Black Freedom Struggle

Edited by Monica Moorehead

An anthology of writings by Workers World newspaper.

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Continued from page 1

Most corporate media coverage of the fires has laments the damage and disruption experienced by tourists and predominantly white settlers.

Many articles have mentioned the climate crisis, the bourgeois press has ignored the direct role of capitalism, imperialism and settler-colonialism in causing these disasters.

Hawai’i’s wildfires are just some of the many blazes — sparked by record-breaking droughts, heat waves, and extreme weather — which have devastated Indigenous lands around the world. Yet, they are also the specific and direct result of the ongoing settler-colonial occupation of Hawai’i.

In 1893, U.S. planters and businessmen orchestrated a coup d’état that overthrew the sovereign monarchy of Hawai’i, dethroning Queen Lili’uokalani and preparing the way for U.S. annexation in 1898. U.S. settler authorities stole and enclosed thousands of acres of Kānaka Maoli land and imposed a system of cash crop cultivation that decimated Kānaka Maoli waterways to irrigate sugar and pineapple plantations, draining vital reserves. In a rush to make way for cultivation overfall lagoon lands and helped fuel the recent wildfires. Today, tourist resorts, golf courses and other playgrounds for the rich continue to gulp millions of gallons of water every year, denying Kānaka Maoli communities vital resources and environmental protections.

Protests vs. U.S. Navy ships’ toxic leaks

As previous Workers World articles have described, ongoing U.S. military occupation has caused further environmental devastation. Kānaka Maoli activists continue to protest the headquarters of the U.S. Navy’s Pacific Fleet at Wai Momi (Pearl Harbor), which has leaked tens of thousands of gallons of jet fuel and other toxic chemicals into the aquifer at Kapi‘olani (Red Hill), leaking thousands of residents without clean drinking water. (workers.org/2023/06/1103)

“Our water has been taken away from us,” said Kānaka Maoli organizer Noëlani Ahia in a recent interview. “And it’s left us in this dry, barren, almost unrecognizable ... condition we’re living in under the settler government. So, you combine the dispossession with the overtourism, with the over-development, and you have this trifecta for disaster.” (Democracy Now, Aug. 11)

The fires in Hawai’i are yet another horrific consequence of capitalism, imperialism and settler-colonialism that continue to inflict environmental and human destruction on an unimaginable scale.

A lasting solution to these environmental catastrophes can only come when the Kānaka Maoli, along with all other Indigenous nations worldwide, including in the continental U.S., win full sovereignty and take back their stolen lands.