

United States

Hawaii - Maui's deadly fires: Government failures and disaster capitalism

Wednesday 30 August 2023, by [SHEPPARD Barry](#) (Date first published: 18 August 2023).

People around the world have seen the horror of the wildfires on the Hawaiian island of Maui. Its historic city, Lahaina – formerly the capital of the Hawaiian Kingdom – burning to the ground, people trying to escape into the ocean, or by car, cars burning and more.

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The death toll had reached more than 111 by August 17, making it the deadliest fire in the United States in more than a century.

Maui native and national director of the Green New Deal Network, Kaniela Ing, told DemocracyNow! as the fires were still burning on August 11: "These are really somber times ... Hundreds of people have been evacuated and hospitalised. The death toll is climbing and people are searching for loved ones right now.

"As it occurred, we saw community members jumping into the ocean with nowhere else to go, just floating and watching their homes being reduced to ashes ... It was apocalyptic, something you would only see in a movie."

Ing said there are two factors contributing to the disaster: the first being climate change.

"The spread was [caused] by hurricane-force winds and by dry vegetation and low humidity. Those are functions of climate change. This isn't disputable."

Hurricane Dora became a tropical storm when it crossed into the Pacific from the Caribbean, then grew to a Category Four Hurricane, with winds of more than 130 miles per hour (200 km/hr). It took a long and unusual path to the south of Hawaii before moving further west. While Dora didn't drop any rain on Hawaii, its winds fanned the flames on Maui.

Ocean temperatures have reached record highs, and warmer oceans produce more powerful hurricanes.

The second contributing factor to the fire disaster is the mismanagement of land, said Ing.

"[The original] Big Five oligarchy in Hawaii, missionary families that took over our economy and government, they continue on today as some of the largest political donors and landowners and corporations."

These interests have “been grabbing land and diverting water away from this area for a very long time now, for generations”, said Ing.

“Lahaina was actually a wetland ... but ... because they needed water for their corporate adventures, like golf courses and hotels and mono cropping, that has ended.

“This disaster is anything but natural.”

Also influencing the spread of the fire was that fire hydrants were dry.

History

Hawaii’s first inhabitants were Polynesian settlers in the sixth or seventh centuries. The societies they established evolved, and in the modern era became governed by chieftains in different parts, with a feudal class structure.

Following European contact, in 1810, King Kamehameha I, using European military technology and weapons, consolidated control over most of the islands. For the next 85 years monarchs ruled over the Hawaiian kingdom.

In the early 1800s, American whaling vessels began wintering in Hawaii, and the islands were more frequently visited by European explorers, traders, adventurers and missionaries.

In 1820, the first of 15 companies of New England missionaries arrived in Hawaii. The first of these were the “Big Five” — a small but powerful white minority that began to exert greater and greater power over the monarchs.

Private ownership of land was established, and the beginning of a switch to what would become a plantation system owned by wealthy white American planters followed.

To work the sugarcane, coffee and pineapple plantations, additional workers were brought from Japan, the Philippines, Korea and other countries. Many of their descendents remained. Native Hawaiians became a minority.

In 1875 a free trade agreement between the Hawaiian monarchy and the United States was signed. Through it, sugar was imported into the US duty-free, and the US was granted special economic privileges denied to other nations.

In 1887, a company of white troops, the Honolulu Rifles, forced the Bayonet Constitution upon then-King Kalakaua, which severely limited his powers and gave the right to vote to the wealthy (who were generally American and European). When the free trade agreement was renewed that year, the US received exclusive rights to enter and establish a naval base at Pearl Harbour.

When Kalakaua’s successor, Queen Liliuokalani, tried to abrogate that constitution, a group of US and European businesspeople who called themselves the “Committee of Safety”, overthrew the kingdom and seized power in 1893. They were backed by a company of US Marines from the USS Boston, at anchor in the harbour.

A short-lived republic ensued and Sanford Dole — of Hawaiian pineapple fame — was elected president in 1894.

During the Spanish-American war in 1898, the US took control of Hawaii’s ports for its Navy, in its

quest to wrest control of Guam and the Philippines from Spain.

The US formally annexed Hawaii in 1900 and it was finally made a US state in 1959.

Government failures

Since the fire, people have been desperately seeking drinking water, shelter, food and other necessities. But government aid has been slow to arrive from state and federal sources.

Hawaii's fire is the latest climate catastrophe this northern summer, which has seen extreme heat, massive flooding and fires. However, United States President Joe Biden has steadfastly refused to declare a climate change emergency.

If he had done so, and not just in words, he would have been obliged to immediately send much-needed aid. Biden only plans to visit the disaster site on August 21 — more than two weeks since the fires began.

People on Maui and the rest of Hawaii have jumped in to do the best they can to help, as have others from the US mainland. US celebrity talk show host, Oprah Winfrey, who owns a large property on Maui, joined others in Lahaina helping at a temporary shelter and bought supplies. Private individuals have donated money.

The West Coast International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) —representing most dock workers in Hawaii and known for its progressive actions — sent containers of supplies to Maui on ships.

All this is in sharp contrast to the lack of action by the federal government.

Biden doesn't want to allocate funds to deal with the climate emergency. Meanwhile, nearly a trillion dollars went to the military this year and tens of billions went to the war industries to further US imperialist interests.

If Biden declared a climate emergency (in deeds not just words), he would have to step in to force the fossil fuel industries to rapidly end the production of greenhouse gas emissions responsible for accelerating global warming.

Instead, he approves more and more gas and oil projects, saying capitalism can solve the crisis with carbon capture and storage schemes.

Those scientists not in the pay of the fossil fuel and related industries, say these schemes won't work.

Biden insists he has “practically” declared a climate emergency, but Ing told DN! that “as soon as I start thinking about that statement from President Biden, I just get so incensed. This is a climate emergency. There is no ‘practically’. You either believe it or not.

“[A]s bad as Republicans have been by denying climate change, Democrats are just as culpable by not doing enough.

“Scientists say that we need to be investing at least \$1 trillion a year in the clean energy transition. We need to end and phase out, deny all new fossil fuel permits, and really empower the communities to build back ourselves democratically.”

Disaster capitalism

Now, the residents of Lahaina face a new danger, according to Common Dreams, from “wealthy outsiders”, who “will dominate and further serve themselves with a multibillion-dollar rebuild after the devastation” of the fires.

This prompted Naomi Klein — author of *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* — to respond with a one-word post: “Again”. Klein, who coined the term disaster capitalism, said it “describes the way private industries spring up to directly profit from large-scale crises”.

The AP reported that even before the fire, Lahaina experienced “a chronic housing shortage and an influx of second-home buyers and wealthy transplants” who “have been displacing residents”.

“Condos and hotels ‘that we can’t afford, can’t afford to live in — that’s what we’re afraid of,’” said one resident, who spoke to the AP from an emergency shelter.

Uahikea Maile, a Kanaka Maoli [Hawaiian First Nations] activist and scholar at the University of Toronto St George in Canada posted in response to the AP report on the fires: “To consider this an economic opportunity to acquire land for development & profit is beyond the pale...”

Former US soccer player Mana shim, who is also Kanaka Maoli, posted: “Anyone who knows disaster capitalism knows the urgency of protecting our ‘aina [land] from developers and greedy malihini [strangers].”

Barry Sheppard

P.S.

• GLW. Issue 1388. August 18, 2023:

<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/mauis-deadly-fires-government-failures-and-disaster-capitalism>