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USA

# After the Fire: Reconstructing Los Angeles Towards Abolition

- Features -

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**When the Eaton Fire first began its retreat from Altadena, I was in one of many self-organized mutual aid teams scattered across the area, cleaning up debris. Around this time, I connected with some Black community members who had just lost their homes. They had returned from evacuation almost immediately to help coordinate mutual aid for their neighbors. But they were harassed by the police as they tried to return to their homes. Hundreds of armed California National Guard, summoned by Los Angeles police and sheriffs, had effectively begun occupying parts of Altadena. The fires already disproportionately affected Western Altadena, the historically Black area of the city where most of the deaths have been located so far and where residents were given notices to evacuate hours after those in majority-white areas of Altadena were informed. [1]**

The Los Angeles fires have become the most devastating in American history, causing widespread destruction in the Pacific Palisades and the San Gabriel Valley. The state seized the moment to portray itself as a savior in a time of great need. But its operations belie a different reality. Los Angeles has been under a budget crisis, fueled by a ballooning increase in the police budget at the expense of nearly all essential services, including the fire department. Mike Davis's ever-timely essay, "The Case for Letting Malibu Burn," identifies Los Angeles's long commitment to enabling the wealthy to redevelop in fire-hazard zones after each wildfire, often ignoring environmental restraints. [3] This development has not translated into prosperity for the rest of the city. Working-class communities have been repeatedly decimated by fires because of negligent housing or working conditions beyond their control. Worse yet, each cycle of new development enables the next round of wildfires. Los Angeles's ever-increasing police presence is not incidental to these patterns; it actively recommit us to the conditions that enable such disparities across repeating crises.

The dystopian roadblocks set up by the National Guard in Altadena stood in stark contrast to the Angelenos keeping the city alive with mutual aid. People have been housing and feeding one another. Some even assisted in putting out the fires, as the underfunded fire department had publicized a call for volunteer support. These Angelenos were essentially filling in the functions left empty by the state, whose clearest intervention during the crisis manifested in endless rows of military vehicles that divide Altadena, guarding nothing but ashes and sand along the western beaches.

What's more, mass mutual aid has provided an invaluable opportunity for Angelenos to raise their political consciousness, integrating longstanding and emerging movement demands. Tenant organizers almost immediately demanded a rent freeze and eviction moratorium as the fires started. Abolitionists rallied the community to push for the evacuation of incarcerated youth ignored by the state in evacuation areas. Just as natural disasters and the city's incapacity to protect its community, the eruption of city-wide mutual aid did not emerge spontaneously. The reconstituting militancy of the late 2010s and early 2020s Los Angeles left—pandemic protection, defense for unhoused communities facing police sweeps, immigrant defense rapid response efforts, the movement for Black lives, and the solidarity movement with Palestine—repeatedly allowed the people to exercise its instinct for community safety and political mobilization.

But this growth is far from steady. We must continue to strengthen and cohere these movements toward a greater level of political consciousness and organization. More specifically, movements must build on the momentum generated in recent years, including the mass mutual aid efforts during these fires. This momentum could be channeled toward a coalition around a program of demands that would center on public ownership and control over essential resources to ensure postdisaster reconstruction benefits working-class and marginalized communities. The resources for this reconstruction program must center on the expropriation of police resources as a common

denominator among movements—in other words, an *abolitionist city budget*, building on earlier efforts by the movement for Black Lives.

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Before the fires, Los Angeles was already facing a budget crisis. City revenues had flatlined. Homelessness has reached unprecedented heights, despite countless new corporate developments promised to restore jobs, housing, and the local economy more broadly. At the center of the problem is the slashing of social services to account for the budget deficit just as police spending continues to skyrocket. The political alliance between real estate interests and the police is unambiguous. Last year a wide array of Los Angeles developers poured in vast resources to ensure “tough-on-crime” advocate Nathan Hochman’s victory over George Gascon in the election for district attorney, making Hochman’s campaign the most expensive bid for that office in Los Angeles’s history. [4]

The state’s failures as the fires erupted blatantly show the consequences of these imbalances. The Los Angeles Fire Department (LAFD) faced the second-largest cut of all city departments in Bass’s 2024–5 fiscal budget—nearly \$17.8 million—just as the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) was granted a nearly \$140 million increase. The LAFD chief spoke to CNN about the pitfalls of this budget as the fires were still being contained, testifying that last year’s budget cut “has and will severely impact our ability to repair apparatus.” [5] Dozens of fire trucks still sit idly in the city’s repair lots, waiting for necessary maintenance that LAFD requested in last year’s city budget. [6]

This hollowing of essential firefighting services has increased the city’s reliance on superexploitative prison labor. In certain years, incarcerated firefighters make up nearly a third of the city’s wildfire defense. Months before the fires, public officials admitted that the reduction in using prison labor for firefighting services in recent years (due to efforts from prisoners’ rights advocates) would lead to critical shortages in the state’s capacity for wildfire control. [7] Nearly a thousand incarcerated firefighters were employed at the height of the fires this year. Many were not given regular meals, were unable to shower for days on end, and worked for days without sleep. When the Pacific Palisades fire approached a mile of Barry J. Juvenile Hall, the facility refused to release the dozens of incarcerated youth held there despite Mayor Karen Bass’s mandatory evacuation notice in the surrounding area. [8]

As firefighters were stretched to their limits, the city decided to deploy even more police, calling in thousands of California National Guard officers to occupy parts of Altadena. At the apex of the Palisades and Eaton fires, mutual aid organizers and independent journalists documented police sweeps against unhoused communities. At the same time, they also detected various law enforcement agencies, including Border Patrol and ICE, rounding up immigrant workers across the county. Grassroots organizers and independent journalists were forced to respond to calls for support and documentation even as we had our hands full coordinating resources for our communities.

Mainstream media and public officials justified this influx of policing with an unsubstantiated narrative of stopping “looters,” just as LAPD declared that it had “no information regarding looting or other criminal activity in the affected areas.” [9] Police soon reported around two dozen arrested on suspicion of looting within days of the fires’ start, but only a handful were charged. Instead of assisting with wildfire control, armed police can be seen loitering around the city, taking on the role of the roaming anarchic looter they themselves had conjured. When the police had something to contribute, it was busy displacing, deporting, and endangering marginalized communities already struggling to survive through the existing crisis. In this sense, the police perform the very kind of opportunistic violence against which they proclaim to guard.

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Coupled with longstanding local ecosystems of community aid, especially among communities of color, the left has stepped up to sustain a city that had been systematically abandoned by the state in an unprecedented moment of crisis.

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In reality, a “looting problem” as large as the police claim would signal a far greater social crisis requiring a swift and radical transformation of the organization and distribution of city and county resources, rather than increased policing. But the function of policing precisely works to maintain and reproduce the existing social relations, actively sustaining the ideology that corporate-backed redevelopment is essential to Los Angeles’s livelihood. This role is all the more needed when social contradictions inevitably burst into flames, threatening the security of this myth.

Thus, the state needs an excuse to justify its militarized existence in Altadena, distracting the populace from its well-documented instances of institutional failure that had led to this crisis. Unsurprisingly, the scapegoats of choice are Black, unhoused, immigrant, and other marginalized communities. Incidents of racial profiling surfaced as soon as hundreds of California National Guard were sent to Altadena and Pasadena to assist sheriffs and police officers, further spurred by the media and public officials’ fearmongering. One Black suspect was caught in suspicion of the arson that started the Pacific Palisades fire, with their photos blasted across mainstream news outlets. But the “suspect” was released the day after, without being charged, due to a lack of evidence. Meanwhile, police officers reportedly denied a Pacific Palisades resident access to their own vehicle, as they were surrounded by flames and black smoke. [\[10\]](#) They only escaped by hitching a ride with a stranger passing by in an SUV.

In Altadena, a community with a sizable historically Black population, I encountered Black organizers who were harassed by the police during mutual aid efforts. Many of them had just lost their homes. A Black Altadena community member, who had lost his home in the fires, returned to the area to assist with mutual aid and check on his neighbors. He told me that he was harassed and racially profiled by the police in the process. A Black Pasadena resident, who I encountered through local mutual aid efforts, tried to check in on their childhood home but was accosted and put in cuffs by police officers in Pasadena despite showing their identification. Another Black Altadena resident I met near the police roadblocks said that they were not permitted to return to their house and found the police presence “suspicious.”

The reality is clear: the unprecedented scale and tragedy of this year’s wildfires shows that the ever-increasing privatization of and divestment from essential services for policing directly threatens the collective well-being of Los Angeles communities.

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On the other hand, Angelenos have protected each other and kept the city alive during the fires through one of the most widespread coordinations of mutual aid the city has seen in recent memory. [\[11\]](#) In the first days of the fires, an “LA Fires Mutual Aid” Signal group exploded into nearly a thousand members, spreading as quickly across social networks to respond to emergencies as the wildfires did. These groups included representatives of established community organizations, from longtime mask distribution mutual aid groups to tenant unions and workers’ centers, as well as previously unorganized community members wanting to help. New chats were organized quickly to accommodate specific needs, such as more localized coordination by community members near specific fires and neighborhoods. Chats provided real-time updates on what items or services were most needed at dozens of mutual aid sites. Tens of thousands of people coordinated across the city, intertwining with more localized, established, and offline mutual aid sites, like those run by churches. Mutual Aid LA has gathered a substantial list of such grassroots mutual aid resources. [\[12\]](#)

Volunteer mutual aid committees in Altadena, many surrounding hubs like Pasadena Community Jobs Center, have been seen on nearly every block to assist with street cleaning as soon as the fires began to recede. Local Black community institutions, like Octavia’s Bookshelf, Pasadena Black Equity Project, Black Men Build, and various churches, have been at the center of coordinating mutual aid efforts, even as some of their organizers and their families personally lost their homes in the fire. Rhythms of the Village, a longtime Black cultural center, burned down; its owners have already repurposed the site as a daily mutual aid center as they rebuild. [\[13\]](#) These self-organized

mutual aid efforts also facilitated masses of overflow items to larger, established aid centers, unofficially helping to sustain operations there. A local resident teamed up with a FedEx driver, who lost his job because the work routes burned down, to set up an impromptu center on the border of Altadena and Pasadena in a gas station. They kept the station running into the night, which was packed with people despite being inside a curfew area enforced by the National Guard. [14] The makeshift gas station mutual aid spot continues to run under the name of *Altadena Communal Kitchen*. [15]

Significantly, these mutual aid efforts have organically gathered nearly every active part of the Los Angeles left, which has been traditionally siloed into different campaigns and regions up until recent years. Mutual aid coordination brought together rank-and-file labor militants, Palestine solidarity groups, tenant unionists, local abolitionist mutual aid collectives, and members of socialist organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the Peace and Freedom Party and the Party for Socialism and Liberation (PSL). These efforts have been organized across a Los Angeles geography that has been traditionally challenging for organizing cross-city action. Left-wing bookstores and institutions from Inglewood to El Sereno—like All Power Books, Midnight Books, Octavia’s Bookshelf, Black Lantern Books, and Eastside Cafe—emerged as key distribution and resource hubs whose operations rivaled established state crisis response centers. The active participation of the Los Angeles left highlights the militant politics of mass mutual aid. Youth Justice Coalition’s call to pressure Sylmar correctional facilities to evacuate incarcerated youth trapped near the fires circulated rapidly across mutual aid networks. [16] LA Tenants Union (LATU) organized a public spreadsheet to document landlords who have price-gouged rent during the fires (over one hundred were listed in the first few days of the fires), prompting the Mayor’s Office to create a hotline for people to report illegal price gouging. [17] The Keep LA Housed coalition demanded a city-wide emergency eviction moratorium on the second day of the fires. [18] LATU echoed this demand on the following day, also calling for a rent freeze and seizure of vacant homes for those displaced. [19] My organization, Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED), which organizes tenants and unhoused communities in Chinatown, has been involved in mobilizing our members for this campaign. On January 12, an emergency mobilization was called by immigrant rights activists in response to the sighting of mass deportations across the county in mutual aid networks in Placita Olvera. Despite being called last minute, the rally turned out nearly five hundred participants, including a number of pro-Palestine activists especially mobilized by the South Pasadena-based AUSIIME. [20]

This convergence between movements did not emerge in a vacuum. The dexterity with which the Los Angeles left coordinated mass political activity and mutual aid developed from muscle memory, honed through countless direct actions and mutual aid organized by Palestine activists in the months following October 7 and during the campus encampments last year. Before that, disability justice activists, through collectives like Mask Bloc LA and Airgasmic LA, had already developed a robust infrastructure for coordinating the city-wide distribution of masks and other essential resources. [21] Years of mass deportations of immigrants and police sweeps on unhoused communities have also cultivated a sharp instinct for community defense and cop-watching among activists, led by groups like Aetna Street Solidarity, Water Drop LA, and Palms Unhoused Mutual Aid. Rent freezes and eviction moratoriums were key demands raised by tenant and housing justice groups when the pandemic began. These enabled stronger mass tenant associations, now on the frontlines fighting for these protections again, and for more. The call to seize vacant homes became conceivable because El Sereno-based working-class tenants—“the Reclaimers”—spontaneously did it to avoid homelessness, facing multiple waves of police violence and eviction threats that had galvanized LA tenant movements in the early 2020s. [22] Coupled with longstanding local ecosystems of community aid, especially among communities of color, the left has stepped up to sustain a city that had been systematically abandoned by the state in an unprecedented moment of crisis.

These moments thus provided an opportunity for us to practice overcoming a historic hurdle in politics across Los Angeles: coordinating efficiently across a uniquely sprawling terrain. Palestine solidarity gave the Los Angeles left the first key opportunity to practice rebuilding this culture of city-wide coordination in urgent conditions. Now, these fires, which have bookended the city, forced us to put what we’ve learned from Palestine solidarity to the test as we struggled to save our own lives. In organizing for Palestine, the Los Angeles left is learning anew—for the first time in generations—how we could organize ourselves in crises across what Davis once called a geography of “spatial

apartheid.”

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The success of mutual aid during these fires undoubtedly represents a key milestone in the gradual rebuilding of the Los Angeles left since the late 2010s and early 2020s. However, it still remains for these social forces to be given a political expression and direction. The growing progressive bloc of DSA-endorsed city council members has served as important allies for movements on certain issues, from pushing for a ceasefire in Gaza to advocating for labor- and renter-friendly policies. However, their links to active social movements have been tenuous at best. Sometimes, they are even in outright tension. Hugo Soto-Martinez has faced scrutiny from activists for perpetuating sweeps on unhoused communities and voting for the most recent police budget. [23] Eunisses Hernandez has been under fire from LA Tenants Union and the Hillside Villa Tenant Association—one of the leading tenant struggles against eviction in the city—for negotiating back door deals with Hillside Villa’s landlord and renegeing on her campaign promise to support their original demand for the city to expropriate their slumlord. Nithya Raman’s concessions to Zionists, among other issues, have alienated not only the Palestine solidarity movement in Los Angeles, but also the local DSA chapter and national members. [24]

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This uneven relationship between left-wing elected officials and broad social movements in Los Angeles shows the need for the left to be unified around a political strategy that builds on existing, active social movements that can pose a political alternative to the city’s ruling institutions. This is also necessary because the Democratic Party establishment and corporate elites are wasting no time scheming to relegitimize the same policies that have caused these disasters—further spurred by pressure from the right. As an immigrant rights and tenant activist during the early months of the first Trump administration, I have witnessed the Democratic Party’s abetting of the political vision of its partisan rivals, from systematically defunding essential services to mass deporting immigrants while expanding the carceral state. [25]

From the national to local levels, the same trends are appearing. Bass’s progressive veneer only masks that her policies are a direct continuation of those of her predecessors. There are already clear signs of what Gavin Newsom’s neoliberal vision of postdisaster relief would look like. He promises that a team is looking to “reimagine a LA 2.0,” involving pouring city resources into developments serving the World Cup, Superbowl, and Olympics in coming years—institutions that have historically impoverished local communities more than they have given back to them. [26] Less than a week after the fires began, Newsom signed an executive order that would allow developers to bypass basic environmental standards to rebuild in afflicted areas—thus laying the groundwork for the next crisis. [27]

To tackle these intertwining threats, the Los Angeles left must build on the energy generated by mutual aid toward political demands that identify and challenge the city’s capitalist governance at its core. Indeed, the decentralization of mutual aid could make such a task challenging, though such efforts have powerfully continued to develop a growing milieu of militants in the city who are not only dedicated to collective action, but bridging struggles against the different expressions of capitalism. At the same time, no single organization has the capacity to dominate these spaces. As a local socialist organizer Ndindi Kitonga puts it, “We need more than study sessions, affinity groups, and mutual aid. At the same time, politicization can/should be happening in these aforementioned spaces. How do we move from volunteerism, merely reacting, and possible adventurism?” [28]

A crucial first step is bringing together different movements to discuss and debate a platform of demands representing different bases and campaigns. Such an effort would build on earlier initiatives to gather the city in political discussion in the early 2020s, from Black-led movements, like Black Lives Matter Los Angeles's People's City Budget and Black Men Build's "community assemblies," to the municipalist Los Angeles for All. [29] The focus would be a renewed effort for an abolitionist city budget that gathers longtime and emerging movement demands. The ever-increasing police budget has become a mundane hallmark of Los Angeles city budgets in recent years, a trend sure to continue with city and state officials' plan for rebuilding. Noncarceral solutions and essential services—needed for a genuine vision of reconstruction and advocated by movements across the county—are being actively deprioritized for more policing. An abolitionist city budget would turn city officials' vision of reconstruction on its head, defunding law enforcement to funnel resources instead to social policies focused on the decommodification of social life—many of which are already being raised by community organizations. In other words, unity across Los Angeles's movements for a program of reconstruction grounded on an abolitionist city budget must build on existing organizing efforts, political demands, and various social forces that have been building power in recent years. They must also challenge the existing consensus of local Democratic Party officials, while providing entry points for mass movements to plug in.

What are such demands that would make up a unified program and call for an abolitionist city budget? An essential starting point, of course, must be calling for scaling back the annual police budget. This includes attacking specific aspects of the budget, like centering pro-Palestine activists' campaign to 'End The Deadly Exchange' between LAPD (and other law enforcement agencies) and the Israel Defense Forces. [30] We should also demand a transparent investigation of how LAPD, ICE, California National Guard, and other law enforcement agencies have impacted marginalized communities during the fires and inhibited relief and aid work.

The ballooning police budget directly parallels and defends the gross development of rentier interests, represented especially by corporate developers. Though long mystified by the Angeleno cultural imaginary, these elements are parasitic on community interests and safety, a contradiction that ultimately erupts in the kinds of natural catastrophes witnessed in the fires. And so, an abolitionist budget would also organize mass movements to contain these forces. We can begin by doing so by rejecting California's plan for a "LA 2.0," specifically highlighting the NOlympics campaign's call to turn down the 2028 bid for the Olympics so that resources can be prioritized for reconstruction and reparations efforts for local Angelenos. [31]

The resources freed up by divesting from law enforcement could be used to fund essential services, not through privatization, but toward decommodification. For example, we could demand state control of fire-hazard lands and that environmental regulations firmly adhere to and even go beyond the California Environmental Quality Act, directly challenging the interests of Big Oil and other private proprietors. We could demand better labor rights, from emancipating incarcerated workers, especially those involved in firefighting efforts, to protecting and extending the benefits for workers in industries dealing with the fires, from healthcare to waste management. In addition, we must uplift calls by tenant organizations for a rent freeze and eviction moratorium during the reconstruction process. Indigenous organizations have released a wide-ranging set of demands encouraging federal, state, and city agencies to integrate Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) practices to develop Los Angeles's climate-resilient infrastructures. [32] In other words, many community organizations are already taking the lead in mobilizing for specific demands. But a common political program and strategy is needed to advocate for them and develop movements together across Los Angeles.

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Indeed, an abolitionist city budget for Los Angeles and in cities across the county would not be fully feasible without a radical overhaul of our existing political system. But that is precisely the point. Our program should also encourage mass organizations to *develop* and *heighten* our demands as we organize. A call for an abolitionist city budget identifies defunding all arms of law enforcement as a fundamental point of unity across movements. Organizing



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around this common denominator would distinguish those seeking a radical transformation of our political system from those limited to piecemeal reforms. The police budget is also a concrete site of resources that could be expropriated toward social housing, increased labor and environmental protections, decommodified developments for the people, and the restoration of Indigenous forms of land sovereignty. Los Angeles needs a rallying point for different movements that could raise a political alternative to the right, which is sure to scale up its efforts, with our own programmatic vision of reconstruction that we could bring back to empower different movements.

Some of these goals are very much achievable in part, but their fullest manifestation would require a revolutionary transformation of our city institutions. These fires have given Los Angeles a costly glimpse of what “socialism or barbarism” would mean today: either we radicalize our vision of political change, or nature could eradicate us.

[Spectre](#). January 28, 2025

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