

Australian fires: Canberra residents left to fend for themselves

A WSWs reporting team
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Just over a week ago, Canberra, the Australian national capital, was hit by one of the worst fire disasters in the country's history. Driven by hot, dry winds, bush fires broke containment lines on January 17 and engulfed several suburbs the following day. Four people were killed, over 200 were treated for injuries and 530 houses and buildings were destroyed. Hundreds more homes were badly damaged.

Canberra, which is located in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), is a city of some 320,000 people. A team of *World Socialist Web Site* reporters last week visited the working-class suburbs of Duffy and Holder, two of the worst affected areas, directly opposite forest and pine plantations.

The suburbs resembled a battlefield with row after row of burnt-out homes and the scorched remains of cars. Fires were still burning on the northern and western outskirts of the city and a smoky haze covered the area. Homes that survived the flames were uninhabited and, apart from an occasional resident searching through the ashes of their homes, the place was almost deserted. Gas, telephone and other utilities, such as electricity and sewerage, were non-existent. Powerpoles had been incinerated and electric wiring hung across streets.

Two things soon became evident. Fire precaution and other emergency measures were woefully inadequate. When the firestorm hit, city inhabitants were largely left to fend for themselves with government services in chaos and the leadership of emergency services either non-existent or seriously unprepared. Senior-deputy captain Peter Holding, from a New South Wales fire crew, told ABC radio: "There was no field command, [and] there were no group captains there that knew the area, that were telling us where to go and what to do."

Secondly, as soon as the firestorm had passed, politicians and the press immediately tried to silence anyone critical of emergency planning. Those raising questions were denounced as "white-anters" who were responsible for undermining frontline firefighters. ACT Chief Minister Jon Stanhope accused critics of "damaging the morale of the Emergency Services Bureau and ... those 400 people we now have out there standing between this fire and the suburbs of Belconnen."

The real responsibility for the lack of preparation rests with local and federal governments. A significant issue is the rundown of professional fire fighting services in Canberra. Until early last year, the current force of just 290 officers was at least 20 percent understaffed. To cut costs, fire officers who resigned or retired were not replaced. The service was only brought up to full strength, with 50 new recruits, just prior to the ACT election.

The damage, however, had already been done. Low manning levels prevented the implementation of specialised training programs over

the previous five years. The new recruits lacked experience and training. This problem combined with a lack of equipment—only 12 fire tankers—hampered the determined efforts of professional fire fighters to help organise and fight the fires.

Despite attempts to quash public discussion, many Canberra residents, in letters to the local press and interviews with WSWs reporters, were highly critical of authorities and the lack of emergency planning.

In a letter to the *Canberra Times*, Derek Emerson-Elliott wrote: "There was not a single fire unit made available last Saturday afternoon to assist residents fighting for their homes in the streets of Weston Creek and North Tuggeranong, where we suffered our most grievous losses. Why not, and where on earth where those fire units?"

"I don't criticise the firemen themselves, brave and selfless men and women who regularly put their lives at risk to help us. But surely the armchair strategists, the men in charge with their maps and theories, have something to explain."

In another letter, local resident Geoff Carter, asked why "two fully trained, fully equipped fire crews, complete with a total of 11,000 litres of water, were forced to sit idly by, totally ignored by emergency-services management despite numerous pleas from the crews themselves to be called into the fray."

Carter later told the WSWs that the spare fire crews were attached to the Canberra airport and had been used when fires broke out in Canberra 12 months earlier. These crews, however, were not mobilised when the fire hit Canberra on January 18. He explained that Rural Fire Service trucks carried a maximum of 900 litres of water but the two airport trucks had a far larger capacity—one 4,000 litres, the other 7,000 litres.

"That's what stinks. Nothing would have stopped the fires going into Duffy, but perhaps with these two trucks some houses a few streets back would have been saved and some people's lives would not have been destroyed," he said.

Mark Annetts from the tiny settlement of Uriarra, 18 kilometres west of Canberra, which was completely devastated by the fires, told one newspaper: "We don't blame the ones in the yellow coats [fire officers and emergency service workers], but the others, who were giving the orders have a lot to answer for. We all have a lot of questions up here and we really want some answers." Annetts' home was one of 17 out of a total of 24 houses in the small township that were incinerated.

Many residents were not alerted until moments before the firestorm hit and pointed to the lack of basic precautions. Others commented on the impact of cutbacks to government services.

Phyllis Weeks, a pensioner from Eppalock Street, Duffy, where 11

houses were reduced to ashes, told the WSWs she received no warning and knew nothing about the approaching fire until 10 minutes before it struck.

“I didn’t realise what was going on until a neighbour knocked on the door and asked whether I’d heard the news on the radio? She said, ‘I think you’d better get out and start watering your house down.’ There was only time enough for a friend to pick up my daughter, Jane, and her kids and get out. The street was on fire. My friend told me to get in the car. I said no, ‘I’m staying in my house,’ which I did, and whatever caught fire I put out straight away.

“The fire just came through like a big fog. It took two paths and luckily I was on the edge of it. It was completely dark and it was terrible. I’ve never been through a fire before but you don’t have time to stop and think,” she said.

Duffy was the worst affected area with three residents killed and 236 homes burnt down. Among the buildings destroyed was Russell Carter’s BP petrol station. Carter told the WSWs that the fire destroyed most of the garage’s aboveground fixtures but miraculously the auto-gas cylinder had not been affected. Fire fighters later told him that if the cylinder had exploded, one-third of the working class suburb would have been destroyed by the blast.

The neighbouring suburb of Holder was also badly hit by the fire, with 31 homes completely destroyed. Resident Shirley Currie, whose house was opposite one of the pine plantations, spoke with WSWs reporters.

“I feel that the government has left it all too late. The sad part about it is they’ve been laying people off for some time, so the forests are not maintained or cleared like they should be. The area across from my place, for example, should have been seen to. I was going to ring up about it last week before this happened.

“Unfortunately what they do is they come along and do the bus stop but still leave great amounts of dried grass over there in the forest. We had a big storm a few months ago that knocked trees down. They were never cleared and so there was a lot of dead stuff that should have been cleaned up but there was not the manpower to do it.

“People have been losing their jobs for quite some time because the government is cutting back. But if they want forests or recreation areas, they have to maintain them and cut them back further from homes,” she added.

Currie emphasised that her criticism was directed against the government: “The helpers, and all the people that worked to try and save everything, are not to blame for this. It goes back to the government, who is supposed to maintain everything. Cutting down services when you’ve got big forests is very dangerous.”

Another Holder resident, Tony Walter, a retired public servant who lost his home, told WSWs: “Potentially this single event could have killed hundreds. The greatest miracle is that only four people were killed. My house is gone and the only thing that survived is my daughter’s car. She’s a university student working in Melbourne at the moment. When she comes home tomorrow she’ll be absolutely devastated when she sees all her books, essays and computer have gone.”

Walter managed to get himself and his dog into the car when the firestorm hit his street but was unable to find his pet cat. “The embers engulfed everything,” he said. “It was just after 3:30 pm and absolutely pitch black so I just sat in the car with the dog. Flames and flying embers surrounded us and I was beeping the horn and had the headlights and the hazard flashers on. Then, when there was a lull in the embers and the flames, I backed the car out of the driveway. The

house was absolutely engulfed. It was extremely hot, like standing in front of a blast furnace at a steel works.”

Jorgen Hauberg, who owned a local equestrian centre, lost 120 stables, 25 horses and 40 kilometres of fencing in the fire. One of his neighbours was trapped in the fire when the wind turned and was severely burned. A mother and daughter also suffered bad burns when they attempted to save their horses in the next paddock. They were hospitalised and are believed to be on the critical list.

Hauberg told WSWs that he visited fire brigade headquarters in Duffy on Saturday morning to find out whether they should evacuate the equestrian centre. Fire officers told him there was no need but they seemed very confused and didn’t know what was happening. He told them he had dams on the property and offered to show the locations so that firefighting helicopters could use the water.

“The officer gave us his phone number and said if there were spot fires that we couldn’t control to phone them and they’d be around with two fire units in no time. About an hour and a half later the fire came around our back fence. It was a grass fire, something you could still control so I rang them and they said there was no way they were coming out.”

Hauberg was scornful of government attempts to deflect criticism. “One [excuse] was that the bush fire brigade, which has a lot of members in our area, was not trained to fight house fires. Management obviously thinks that the house owners are much better trained because they are left to do it.”

With weeks of hot summer weather ahead and large areas of bushland and national park still burning in the ACT and the neighbouring states of Victoria and NSW, Canberra along with other towns and cities face serious dangers. Just a week after the January 18 fires, emergency service authorities, feared that a 200,000-hectare fire on the ACT border, combined with a return of hot and windy conditions, could threaten Canberra with a second major firestorm. The attempts by local and federal authorities to quell criticism indicate that little or nothing will be done to prevent another disaster.



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