

Australia: Bushfire relief volunteers speak with WSWS

A reporting team
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Victoria's official February 7 bushfire death toll increased to 189 yesterday, after the first update in five days. The total includes 128 in the Kinglake complex, 43 in Marysville, 10 in Churchill, 2 in Beechworth, 1 in Bendigo and 5 in hospital. State authorities say the final death could be over 300.

Six fires are still burning out of control in Victoria and 19 more are burning but "contained", according to emergency services. The town of Healesville, with a population of 6,700 and located between Melbourne and Marysville, has been on alert for ember attack for over a week.

While state officials are playing down the fire damage to Melbourne's water supplies, forests surrounding the O'Shannassy and Maroondah dams have burned, which means that any rainfall in coming weeks would wash large amounts of ash and contaminants into the water, making it undrinkable. The two dams, which hold approximately 11 billion litres, may have to be decommissioned for several months to allow purification. Melbourne uses about 1 billion litres each day.

Yesterday the Victorian government announced the terms of reference for its Royal Commission into the fires, claiming that all issues relating to the fire "would be on the table". However, recommendations from previous inquiries—from Victoria's Ash Wednesday inferno in 1983 through to the fires that swept through Canberra in 2003—have been ignored by Australian governments with tragic consequences.

By contrast to the official record of indifference, neglect and cost-cutting, the February 7 tragedy has produced a massive outpouring of public support. The

government-funded Volunteering Australia, for example, was swamped with volunteers and has a register of 11,000 people who want to assist with bushfire relief. The Red Cross is utilising the services of 400 volunteers, having closed its register for fire relief helpers soon after it made an appeal.

The Rural Workforce Agency of Victoria through its Locum Relief Program for doctors has received over 200 offers of locum support from Melbourne, and has so far placed 23 doctors in emergency centres, rural hospitals and practices to give respite to medical staff.

Fund-raising is taking place in schools, workplaces and communities across the country and money continues to pour into relief funds. Hundreds of people are providing accommodation for bushfire survivors.

Some of this extraordinary response was on display at Whittlesea last weekend when WSWS reporters visited the town, just north of Melbourne. Whittlesea has a volunteer co-ordination centre and a list of more than 1,400 people who want to assist, according to Garry Ewert, the team leader. Ewert said international financial support had also arrived, with £1,000 from Whittlesea's sister town of the same name in England.

WSWS reporters witnessed the arrival of six semi-trailers loaded with relief supplies privately organised in the New South Wales town of Griffith, 250 km north of Whittlesea. Maria Pittari and her husband Louie own a trucking company in Griffith. They called on the local community to give what they could and volunteered to drive it to Victoria. Six trucks were quickly filled.

"People just came and gave everything they could,"

Maria Pittari said. "We were given brand new clothes, food, potatoes, onions, non-perishables, brand new crockery, toys, kids' bikes, new runners, blankets, manchester, some shops donated toiletries, a pallet of drinking water and a pallet of pet food. We were given two loads of hay to feed livestock," she told the WSWs.

"The support from the locals was overwhelming. This is a community of about 24,000 and many of them have their own problems. We have been suffering drought, but they kept coming with the goods.

"I thought if we can't help each other, then what have we got at the end of the day? I rang the Red Cross during the week and they said to send money, but I was worried that the people who needed it would not get the money."

Alongside the Whittlesea emergency relief centre was a tent giving out kebabs. Mustafa Tosun and 15 friends, who work as limousine drivers in Melbourne, banded together, obtained a truck, tent and donations of meat to establish a "distribution point" for the kebabs they cooked.

"We stopped work to come here and I've been cooking kebabs all day. Everybody does what they can," Tosun said. The limo drivers plan to cook kebabs in the stricken town of Kinglake next week.

Tosun criticised the government's failure to establish a telephone fire warning system. "People should be given a fire emergency warning in time, and as for the [water-bombing] helicopters, there should be 10 of them, not two. Why not 10? They need a minimum of 10, two is nothing," he commented.

"As for the \$42 billion [stimulus package] they're fighting about in parliament, Tosun continued, "there is no budget for this [fire emergency]. The government spends nothing."

Frank and Marie Murone and their friend Lyn, together with their combined five children, brought presents for children who survived the terrifying blaze.

"We decided that we wanted to show some solidarity with the kids here," Frank said. "Our kids have been affected by the fires, they've realised the severity of it. I've started crying myself when watching this on television and had to change the channel. You just envisage what these poor people have gone through.

"Surely now this has happened the government will wake up and have investigations? It's not right that people have to die before they do anything about it. It's the same with the railway crossing deaths," he said.



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