

Australian heat wave kills 60 people, triggers power and transport chaos

Tania Baptist
2 February 2009

A severe heat wave across south-eastern Australia last week resulted in the deaths of more than 60 people and precipitated a breakdown of electricity distribution and public transport systems in the states of Victoria and South Australia.

In South Australia, at least 31 "sudden deaths" in two days were believed to be attributable to the extreme heat conditions. In the capital city, Adelaide, residents have already endured four straight days of temperatures over 43 degrees Celsius (110 Fahrenheit), with the level predicted to remain above 35°C until the end of this week.

In Victoria, police said that at least 30 people had died from heat stress. The state capital Melbourne experienced three consecutive days of more than 43°C, the first time such a situation has been recorded since 1855.

Ambulance Victoria treated more than 1,300 people last Thursday after receiving a 52 percent increase in calls, and more than 1,900 people on Friday, a 72 percent increase. In Adelaide, 61 people were taken to hospital due to heat stress by 6 p.m. on Thursday, with paramedics experiencing a 15 percent increase in demand.

The hot spell also saw major bushfires. In Victoria, a 6,000 hectare bushfire destroyed 29 homes and threatened a major transmission line supplying power to Melbourne from Gippsland in the state's east. Hundreds of fire-fighters, most of whom are Country Fire Authority volunteers, worked throughout Friday night and Saturday to bring the fire under control.

Most of the heat-related fatalities appear to be elderly people. While the exact circumstances surrounding each

death are yet to be determined, there is little doubt that living conditions were a factor in at least some of them. Many elderly people on pensions struggle to manage daily expenses, let alone afford adequate cooling and heating systems for their homes. They also tend to lead isolated lives due to the lack of accessible public services—including home care, nursing, and recreational facilities—leaving them more vulnerable to being overcome by heat stress and dehydration.

Whether the power blackouts that hit hundreds of thousands of households in South Australia and Victoria also caused deaths is not yet known.

In the days before the heat wave, the South Australian Labor government encouraged residents to restrict their usage of air-conditioners to conserve electricity. Victorian Labor Premier John Brumby, however, declared that the state's power supply system could cope with the anticipated spike in demand and was immediately proved wrong, as Wednesday, the first day of extreme temperature, saw more than 100,000 houses and businesses lose electricity in localised power outages.

On Thursday and Friday, the national power wholesaler, National Electricity Market Management Company, instructed private power retailers to begin "load-shedding"—that is, deliberately initiating rolling blackouts across South Australia and Victoria. No notice was issued to those whose homes had their power deliberately shut off at the peak of the heat wave. More than one million households were affected.

Electricity authorities have defended their actions, telling one South Australian newspaper that the public release of the scheduled blackouts would have been "unhelpful". Clearly the concern was for their public

image and preventing open opposition, rather than the well-being of their clients.

The heat wave has again revealed the outdated and poorly maintained state of infrastructure throughout Australia. The country's power network is largely privatised, with the central motive being generating profits, not providing a continuous and reliable electricity supply for the population.

Victorian Premier Brumby summed up the contempt he and his colleagues have for ordinary people when he dismissed criticisms of the power system. "No government, no business would ever make the investment for an event that occurs on one day every 100 years, because it's a waste of money," he declared.

The only infrastructure investments regarded by the major political parties, Labor and Liberal, as appropriate are those that generate profits for the private sector. During the heat wave it was reported that private energy companies in Victoria, with the government's backing, will be installing "smart meters" ,which place a new \$2 per kilowatt/hour charge on energy used during days when the grid is under pressure. Running an average air conditioning unit during the six hottest hours of the day will soon cost \$78 per day. Such exorbitant charges could well lead to more deaths, as people shut off their cooling systems because they cannot afford to pay.

The heat wave also caused major disruptions to the public transport system in both Victoria and South Australia. On Friday, Melbourne's central business district was thrown into chaos after an explosion damaged two major power transmission lines supplying the city's west. Accumulated heat caused another explosion the same day at the South Morang Terminal Station, taking out a 500 kilovolt transmission line, with a second 500 kilovolt line hit soon after 6 p.m., causing power disruptions at peak hour. With many CBD buildings having to be evacuated, and city traffic lights failing, commuters were advised that all rail services had been cancelled and they would need to find alternative transport home.

For Melbourne's long suffering public transport users, the rail service cancellations were the last straw. Private rail operator Connex had cancelled about 200 trains because of faults in the week preceding the heat wave, before slashing approximately 1,500 train services during

the three-day hot spell due to track-buckling, train breakdowns, air conditioning failures, and power stoppages. Tram services were also disrupted and, since fewer than half Melbourne's 486 trams are air conditioned, most passengers who were able to travel had to endure stifling temperatures and overcrowding.

As train cancellations started to mount last week, Connex sought to scapegoat rail workers, accusing them and the Rail, Tram and Bus Union of being overzealous in reporting petty faults in an attempt to gain leverage in enterprise bargaining negotiations. Without any evidence, Connex executive chairman Jonathan Metcalfe claimed that 8 out of 10 cancellations were the result of such unwarranted reporting by train drivers.

This unsubstantiated claim was aimed at covering up the joint responsibility of Connex and the Labor government for the situation. Successive state governments have created the present under-funded, poorly maintained, and privatised public transport system. Prior to the heat wave, the state transport minister Lynne Kosky admitted that "underinvestment over a long period of time" was a major cause of the network's poor performance and conceded that privatised operating arrangements cost the government more money than running the system publicly.

These admissions serve as a devastating exposure of the "free market" arguments for privatised public services. The failure of social infrastructure in the heat wave has revealed the inability of corporations—and the governments that represent their interests—to provide the essential services required by contemporary mass society. Nothing less than the overturn of the anarchic profit system and its replacement with a system based on genuine democracy and rational planning, controlled and organised by the working class—i.e., socialist measures—will ensure the ongoing provision of decent social infrastructure for all, in every area of social life.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact