

Correspondence on Australian bushfires

12 February 2009

The World Socialist Web Site has received the following letters in response to its articles on the Victorian bushfires. (See "At least 128 dead in Australia's worst ever bushfires" and "Evidence mounts of lack of planning prior to Australia's worst bushfire")

We encourage our readers to contact us and contribute to our ongoing coverage with further comments, background information, personal experiences or photographs on the bushfire disasters.

I want to commend Patrick O'Connor on the excellent analysis of the tragic bush fires in Australia.

Some years ago, I was told by a member of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) about the power of the satellite technology that was at their disposal. The technology (and the money to purchase it) is made available to the military when required and yet when it comes to protecting the lives of the people, the use of such technology is only considered after the event. I have little doubt this technology is being employed at present by the ADF in Afghanistan in the pursuit of the interests of the Australian government and the ruling elite; the interests of ordinary working people in Australia are yet again neglected while they are left to fend for themselves.

This episode rivals the mechanisms that led to government neglect and the lack of preparedness that resulted in the suffering of the people in New Orleans due to Hurricane Katrina.

John B
Canada

I wish to remain anonymous but have a comment to make regarding the current bushfires in Victoria and the CSIRO's [Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation] now extinguished Fire Science Team.

The establishment of the Bushfire CRC [Cooperative Research Centres] was a knee-jerk political decision to the Canberra fires in 2003, and this has been reflected in the nature of its research, which has been difficult to pin down in terms of clear and definable outcomes.

Fire Science research was conducted at CSIRO Materials Science and Engineering (or one of its previous variants—Building Construction & Engineering, Manufacturing and Infra-structure Technology or ...), however, it was closed down at the end of June 2007. The reasons for its closure are unclear, however, I suspect that the sort of research may be considered public good research, and therefore suffers from the lack of funding, or may not be considered sexy enough to justify public funding—although it was supported by industry.

I hope we proceed with caution after these fires and take a long-term sustainable view on fire science research in Australia because it has been and will be with us for the long term—hence the words sustainable approach.

Anonymous
Australia

An excellent article. I was a volunteer firefighter at Selby CFA in the late 80s, during which time we faced funding cuts. Although the CFA had a fire training school at Ballarat, when I asked to attend for training, the captain told me that the only people that seemed to get in were private companies that were willing to pay for the training, and volunteers had a very long waiting list of a number of years.

To obtain another fire truck we had to raise the money ourselves with community help, and we also had to purchase our own 4WD, something that is a necessity in the mountains.

About warning systems, when I was in Cairns, north Queensland, the Cairns council ran a warning system and cyclones have categories and appropriate warnings, and safe areas. As cyclones are reasonably predictable, how much more valuable is a warning system for bushfires, as their speed, direction, wind direction and intensity is subject to variation.

Victoria has a disaster plan called "DISPLAN" but I do not know if it was activated or if not why not. If it was actioned, it certainly didn't defend life or property.

JS
Melbourne

Thank you for the clear and concise article on the recent bushfire disaster in Victoria.

I find it inconceivable that such a horrific event could occur in Australia and take the lives of so many. It is truly the worst disaster I have experienced in my life (I am 20).

It is downright disgusting that the Community Information and Warning System was not put into place due to arguments over whether state or federal governments would fund it. This \$10-12 million is a paltry sum in the shadow of the \$42 billion proposed by Rudd to bail out the banks. It is now glaringly obvious where the Australian government's priorities lie; not with the conservation of the lives and property and happiness of ordinary Australians, but with the profitability of big business.

Gary Hughes's open letter serves to further condemn the bureaucracy; asking for bank statements in such a situation? That is unbelievable! In contrast to Centrelink, the generosity of ordinary Australians, who have donated \$20 million dollars to the victims, goes to show how much compassion human beings have for one another in times of crisis. It is also makes clear that the profit system puts money before lives.

How can these politicians and bureaucrats sleep at night? I had trouble sleeping as I thought about this disaster.

EA
Sydney

The responsibility for this terrible disaster lies at the door of the federal and state governments. Rudd and Brumby may call it "mass murder", and they are right. However, the perpetrators of this horrific massacre are not some unidentified arsonists, but those sitting in power in Canberra and Melbourne. They are the ones who bear ultimate responsibility for the death and destruction resulting from these fires. They are the ones who should be brought to justice.

EG
South Africa

In New Zealand we have been constantly reminded by the bourgeois media that hundreds were "burned to death", "incinerated", "in their cars"—as if we didn't know or need more reminding. But there has been no proper explanation, no serious investigation to uncover the truth. Rather, a smear campaign has been launched against terrorist-like "arsonists"—instead of the likelihood of lightning strikes—and equating nature with being "evil," and similar ignorant, media-encouraged stupidity.

Compare the miniscule \$10 million amount offered by the Australian government to the survivors and \$5,000 to the victims' funerals to the \$40 billion handout to the banks. What about that "crime scene"?

"There is growing evidence that the terrible toll wrought by the natural disaster was in large part due to the failure of government authorities to adequately plan for such events and to fund and develop the necessary social infrastructure." (wsws.org)

The bourgeois media has been called forth to prevent for as long as possible a serious investigation into the government's role; its failure to provide widespread professional fire services (like the California fires last year); its failure to maintain a technologic warning monitor system; its promotion of the individualist "fight or flight" 'policy', which leaves firefighting up to the non-professionals, i.e., the working people and homeowners; and the cuts to government funding and attacks on social infrastructure.

The bourgeois media only prove their complete lack of a serious perspective to explain, let alone understand, the real causes of this tragedy, which is rooted in the profit system that they defend. Instead they seek to find a "convenient scapegoat for the disaster and to deflect any scrutiny of the authorities' bushfire preparations."

The local, state, federal government response is utterly despicable and contemptuous. It recalls the response to 9-11, the Iraq war and the Bali bombings. In these cases the media and political establishment lined up against the working class, used them as helpless victims and as a pretext to suppress criticism to the government's roles in these cases and to launch "wars on terror". Now we have a war on "arsonists" i.e., "evil" mother nature, on behalf of incompetent capitalism!

Keep up the good work comrades. Regards

CR
New Zealand



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wsws.org/contact