

Australia: Victorian bushfires demonstrate the need for a socialist perspective

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In the immediate aftermath of the devastating fires that swept through Victoria on "Black Saturday," killing more than 210 people and incinerating over 2,000 homes, Victorian Premier John Brumby announced a Royal Commission, declaring that the investigation would "leave no stone unturned".

A week later, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was forced to admit in federal parliament that proposals made by previous major bushfire inquiries, which would have saved lives on February 7, had never been implemented. "I hate to think how many of those recommendations have not been acted upon by governments of whichever persuasion, of whichever level and at whichever point in history," he declared.

By any measure the Labor prime minister's confession was extraordinary. It raised the obvious questions: Why had the recommendations not been implemented? Who was responsible?

Rudd, of course, was not about to explore these issues, let alone answer them. To do so would require identifying the political leaders, parties and governments, including his own, the current state Labor administration in Victoria, and the various business interests they represent, that all played a role in ensuring that preparations for the widely-predicted bushfire disaster would be scandalously inadequate.

Any serious examination of the real causes of Black Saturday would reveal a harsh truth—that providing adequate fire-fighting and fire safety measures to protect every person facing potential threat is incompatible with the current socio-economic system, where everything, including human life, is determined by the dollar bottom line.

Notwithstanding his claims, Brumby's forthcoming Royal Commission will be no different to past investigations. Its purpose is not to probe the questions raised by Rudd's admission, but to provide a political breathing space for both the Victorian and federal governments to divert the concerns of survivors, fire-fighting experts and scientists into a state-controlled institution, where they will be contained, dissipated and rendered politically harmless.

Even in the event that serious recommendations emerge from the Royal Commission, the Victorian government would be under no obligation to implement them. Its priorities will be no different to those of the governments—Labor and Liberal—that have gone before. It will plead "insufficient resources" as it defends the profit interests of the banks, finance and insurance sharks, developers and construction companies that have already enriched themselves from the economic migration of thousands of working class families into bushfire-prone areas over the past two and half decades.

Such a conclusion emerges from the historical record—from the "Ash Wednesday" fires in 1983, right up to the Black Saturday inferno last month.

Ash Wednesday

The 1983 "Ash Wednesday" fires were the most serious in Victoria since "Black Friday" in 1939, when 71 people died and 2 million hectares were burnt. Ash Wednesday claimed over 47 lives, burnt down more than 2,000 homes and destroyed 400,000 hectares of land, yet key recommendations from the inquiry into the disaster were never implemented.

The investigation found that bushfire mitigation standards in Victoria were "too low" and emergency warning communications "inadequate". It called on the state government to regularly update and improve fire-warning and emergency information systems and assist local governments to provide or adapt existing buildings that would serve as communal shelters.

Communal shelters, however, were never built and, as the death toll on Black Saturday tragically demonstrated, the state of Victoria's emergency warning system was totally out of line with what was required.

Another assessment, published in 1986, was even more damning. Written by Neil R. Britton and entitled *An appraisal of Australia's Disaster Management system following the 'Ash Wednesday' bushfires*, it bluntly stated: "Australia's current disaster management system does not provide an appropriate interorganisational counter-disaster structure, nor does it ensure an efficient operational structure. Even when allowance is made for the inadequate funding provisions that characterise this area of public operations, the present disaster management system falls short of the degree of protection which society has come to expect."

Various state Labor government politicians gave lip-service to some of these concerns when pressed at the time, but then pushed them aside as they moved to adopt the policy of "free-market liberalisation", and its associated ideology of "mutual responsibility," being implemented around the world during the early 1980s.

Led by Britain's Thatcher government (1979-90) and the Reagan administration (1981-89) in the US, the free-market agenda unleashed a wholesale onslaught against the social gains of the working class. State-

owned industries and basic social services were privatised and corporate taxes drastically reduced. These measures, it was falsely claimed, would bring benefits, or "trickle down", to all.

The proponents of the free market insisted that workers could no longer "rely on governments" but had to begin taking responsibility for their own lives. As Margaret Thatcher infamously declared in 1987, "There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first."

It was this perspective that formed the cornerstone, albeit in slightly modified form, of the Hawke and Keating Labor governments in Australia from 1983 until 1996. With the assistance of the trade unions and their "Accord" with the government, the Labor governments ruthlessly imposed the dictates of the "free market" on the working class.

At the same time, consecutive Victorian state governments, both conservative and Labor, cut large swathes through public education, health, transport, power supply and maintenance, implementing closures, privatisations and contracting-out. From 1982 to 1991, the Labor governments of John Cain and Joan Kirner eliminated thousands of state sector jobs, closed hundreds of public schools and privatised or shut down other vital social services.

State fire services

Also targeted were Victoria's three separate fire-fighting agencies—the Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB), which covers the capital, Melbourne; the Department of Sustainability and the Environment (DSE), which combats fires in state and national public forests; and the Country Fire Authority (CFA), which fights fires in rural towns, private rural land and large parts of outlying Melbourne, including many growing population centres.

By the time the notorious Kennett Liberal government took office in 1992, the Cain and Kirner governments had cut funding to the DSE (formerly known as the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, or NRE) for back-burning and other fire prevention measures by 23 percent. Funding for the CFA and MFB, provided by the state government (25 percent) and by a levy on insurance companies (75 percent), remained at nothing more than a drip feed, barely keeping pace with inflation.

During his term, Kennett slashed the number of NRE full-time fire-fighters by almost a half—from 5,500 to 3,000.

Between 1982 and 1995, as Athol Hodgson, president of Forest Fire Victoria and a former member of the CFA board and the State Disaster Committee, recently told the *World Socialist Web Site*, there was a 37 percent decrease in the number of professional/technical personnel designated to managing natural forests, with disastrous consequences. "No agency can function normally in that situation—it is traumatic," Hodgson said.

When Kennett was defeated in a landslide election in 1999, the incoming Labor government of Steve Bracks refused to replace any of the

axed NRE jobs. Instead, Labor maintained a cost-cutting Project Fire Fighters (PPF) scheme, a seasonal contract hire system. This woefully inadequate scheme hires about 600 fire-fighters for a three-month period each year, generally from November to March. These numbers simply cannot meet the back-burning targets for state and national forests, where most of the state's bushfires generally start.

Government culpability

In early January 2003, two decades after Ash Wednesday, another fire storm erupted in Victoria. Caused by lightning strikes in the Alpine forests, it burnt for 59 days, destroying 1.3 million hectares, incinerating 41 homes and claiming one life. A similar fire struck nearby Australian Capital Territory (ACT) forests, burning for more than a week before suddenly moving on Canberra, engulfing its outer suburbs, destroying 500 homes and killing four people.

Inquiries into both fires again pointed to inadequate emergency communications, under-resourced emergency services, and the failure of authorities to introduce adequate back-burning and other preventative measures. Some reforms were introduced in the ACT but little changed in Victoria.

A comment by Premier Bracks, published by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in 2003, highlighted the arrogant and cavalier attitude of the Victorian government.

"In '39," he declared, "there wasn't an effective system in place to protect the lives of fire-fighters, people in the path of fires and their property. Today, we have systems to shape the fire, and move it away from settled areas. Fire-fighters are now trained to know when to retreat or leave, and they have the right back-up and support.

"None of those systems were in place then, and I think it was pretty much 'every man for himself'. That is something we will never, ever do again—to not have a system in place and not have proper preparation," Bracks declared.

Made just after the devastating Alpine forest and Canberra fires, Bracks's comments were astonishing, bordering on criminal. They were made, moreover, at the same time as thousands of young working class families were being forced by financial pressures to relocate to peripheral urban (peri-urban) areas—highly fire-prone areas where land and homes cost less.

These settlements grew rapidly in the decade from 1998, with 4,000 rural dwellings built in six municipalities on Melbourne's outer fringe. The population of north Whittlesea, for example, has expanded by 13.6 percent in the past five years, almost double the average state growth.

Despite these demographic changes and growing numbers of fires—in 2007 there were 1,008 fires in Victoria—no modifications were made to improve fire safety building codes, back-burning remained dangerously inadequate and no advanced national telecommunication warning system was established, even though the necessary network infrastructure already existed, meaning minimal cost was involved. No unified evacuation plans were devised.

Nor was there any substantial investment in fulltime fire-fighting jobs. The DSE, for example, currently has only 2,500 fulltime professional fire-fighters, the MFB 1,630 and the CFA, just over 400. In other words there are only 4,500 fulltime professional fire-fighters in a bushfire-prone state of more than 5.2 million people.

Constant warnings from environmental and climate scientists about worsening conditions were all but ignored. According to a report by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), "catastrophic events are predicted to occur every year in Mildura [in northwest Victoria] and fire-fighters have been told to expect up to a 230 percent increase in extreme danger fire days in Bendigo [central west Victoria] alone." And in Canberra, fire services have been warned to prepare for a more than 200 percent increase in extreme fire days by 2050.

One recommendation, however, that was taken seriously, and progressively adopted by government authorities from 1983, was the "stay and defend or evacuate early" policy, which places almost all responsibility on individuals to establish their own fire protection or evacuation measures.

"Stay and defend or evacuate early" perfectly encapsulates the "individual responsibility" dictums of the "free-market". It neatly absolves governments of any responsibility to provide the fire-fighting and other basic services required for ordinary people to enjoy a safe and secure existence.

In 2003, Premier Bracks insisted that the state would never allow its citizens to be confronted with an "every man for himself" scenario. But that is precisely what happened on Black Saturday.

Most of those killed last month were given no early emergency warnings. They died desperately trying to protect their homes, or in hopeless attempts to flee the inferno. Apart from various fire-safety education programs run by the CFA, individuals were simply left to devise their own evacuation and safety measures. Along with the absence of communications and warnings, these foundered on the lack of decent passable roads.

There is no essential difference between the refusal of Australian authorities to protect their citizens from the fires of February 7 and the response of the Bush administration in the US to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005, or of regimes throughout Asia and the world to the 2004 tsunami.

As for Brumby's Royal Commission, the global economic crisis is bringing increasingly strident demands for cuts to government spending and corporate taxes. In the wake of the disaster, insurance companies are already demanding profit guarantees via the imposition of compulsory home and contents insurance, while calls are being made for the abolition of the insurance levy, which partially funds fire-fighting services.

As the bushfire season ends and the political and media establishment turns to next business, the fate of Black Saturday's victims will recede from public view. Government promises of blanket support will be quietly shelved and the survivors left to largely fend for themselves.

Ordinary working people must draw urgent political lessons from these past experiences. Only by tackling the problem at its source—the capitalist profit system itself—can the kind of disaster that has devastated so many communities be averted and the government onslaught on health,

education and other essential social services be challenged and defeated.

This requires that working people make a decisive political break from the Labor and trade union apparatus, and its nationalist and pro-capitalist perspective, and begin to take matters into their own hands through the fight for a workers government that will reorganise society along socialist lines, including the nationalisation of the banks, insurance companies, building and construction corporations and other key industries under full democratic control.

Opponents of this perspective will claim that working people are incapable of meeting this challenge. But Black Saturday not only exposed government culpability for the disaster's high death toll, it also revealed the extraordinary courage, self-sacrifice and organisational abilities of ordinary people, who came forward in their thousands to provide finance, food, medical care, transport and countless other forms of assistance to the survivors.

Whilst this deeply felt and widespread reaction was not animated by a socialist perspective, it has nevertheless demonstrated the potential that exists for a unified movement of working people to refashion society and its social and economic priorities.

Such a movement must be based on the perspective of socialist internationalism—the unity of the working class throughout the world to put an end to the profit system and build a society in which the needs and aspirations of the vast majority hold sway over private profit. This is the program for which the Socialist Equality Party fights. We urge all workers and youth to study the SEP's perspective and to seriously consider joining our ranks.

The author also recommends

Australia: Few attend Rudd's much-hyped "National Day of Mourning"
[25 February 2009]

Australia: Bushfire expert exposes decades of government neglect
[20 February 2009]

As death toll rises: Evidence mounts of lack of planning prior to Australia's worst bushfire
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