

Victorian bushfire survivors continue to face uncertainty and devastation

A WSWs reporting team
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Immediately after the Black Saturday bushfires that devastated Victoria on February 7 last year, killing 173 people and destroying over 2,000 homes, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd promised the devastated towns would be rebuilt “brick by brick”.

One year later, the reality of life for bushfire survivors is far different than the sanitised picture painted by the media and the government. Hundreds are still forced to live in makeshift housing as they wade through government and insurance company red tape and battle to rebuild their homes and lives. (See: “One year since Australian bushfires: communities abandoned as government cover-up continues”)

A WSWs team last weekend visited the Kinglake area, 45 kilometres northeast of Melbourne, where 120 people died on Black Saturday.

The small hamlet of Strathewen, situated in a small isolated valley near Kinglake township, was almost totally wiped out, with 27 of its 200 residents killed. Only one house was left standing.

Apart from a shipping container labelled “community tool library” and debris removed from the burnt-out homes and the primary school, there is little sign of any rebuilding in Strathewen. A roadside memorial of small photos and poems tied to a blackened tree stump is a reminder of the terrible human tragedy.

The town of Kinglake lost 38 out of its population of 1,100. Most of the town was destroyed, including its central shopping strip. One year later, the shops have been rebuilt, but most of the town’s community amenities are still housed in temporary relocatable buildings. A small residential area called Kinglake Village is made up of about 50 portable buildings and accommodates 140 people from the district.

A one-kilometre section of Kinglake Road has caravans dotted along the roadside in place of burnt-out houses yet to be rebuilt. There is still no petrol station in Kinglake, with the nearest fuel over 10 kilometres away in Eltham or Whittlesea.

Many people died on February 7 attempting to leave the area

at the height of the fires on small narrow winding roads. Nothing has been done to increase the capacity for a mass and rapid exit from the fire-prone area, such as widening and improving of the major roads.

Bald Spur Road, where 15 people died, including five children, is still a picture of devastation. Many of the burnt-out houses remain uncleared, with piles of timber and debris.

Sharlene Gray, a single parent with a young daughter, lives in Kinglake Village, one of the four temporary settlements in Victoria accommodating 290 of the 7,000 people rendered homeless by the fires. She spoke with WSWs reporters:

“After the fire I went to my dad’s for two weeks and then we got a rental property for two months. I’ve been here in Kinglake Village since August last year. We pay \$110 a week for a two-bedroom place. It’s very small with no space and everyone knows what you’re doing and when you’re doing it.

“If you were renting before the fires then the Department of Human Services [DHS] tries to get you off the mountain. The DHS bombards us with forms every two weeks, asking: ‘What are your plans for the future? Where are you going now?’

“The DHS pressures you to go to places such as Lakes Entrance, 320km away, or Preston or Epping [Melbourne suburbs]. Everyone has been affected by the fire it has stressed everyone. I don’t know what will happen.

“We received some compensation but it didn’t cover everything at all. We lost virtually everything in the fire. The only thing we had were a few of my daughter’s baby photos. We’re told that we have to be out of here by next August, and by 2011 all this [the temporary village] will be closed. The reality is that we haven’t had time to even look up since the fire.”

Lucy, who was formerly a secondary teacher, was visiting Kinglake Village with her young daughter Maggie to use the amenities. Kinglake Village has shared amenities, including public toilets, shower blocks, laundries and communal kitchens, which are used by the residents and the local community.

Lucy was dissatisfied with the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority, a joint federal and state government body, which administers the \$380 million

donated for bushfire relief.

“None of the public infrastructure has been rebuilt properly. For example, there is no petrol station and we don’t have lots of really basic stuff. There is no decent planning framework. It is all ad hoc. There’s never been proper planning in Kinglake.

“I have lived here for nine years. We lost our house and there is about one house remaining out of 20 or 30 in that little network of streets that existed before the fire. We have been in temporary accommodation all year. Each time we got settled we had to move on, and have moved about six or seven times so far. A lot of these places we had to put in a toilet and oven before we could use it.”

Maggie, Lucy’s daughter, said: “We’ve just got our toilet working now.”

Lucy: “Only a toilet, though. We have no gas for our oven. We use the communal kitchen and laundry facilities and showers here at the village. Basically we’ve been camping since last October. We really didn’t want to move off the mountain. We wanted to keep Maggie at the same primary school she’d been at before.

“One of the problems in Kinglake, and this applied before the fires, is that there’s no secondary school. The kids have to spend an hour and a quarter each way travelling to Diamond Valley or Whittlesea or Yea to go to school. There were a lot of issues here even before the fires.”

Lucy said she had barely followed the Victorian royal commission into the bushfires. “It has been too difficult trying to live. We’ve basically had no TV coverage anywhere we’ve lived,” she said. “One thing I’d say about the new recommendation that everybody should leave on a day of catastrophic fire danger is where do you go to? My parents live in Canberra. As my father said, where would everybody go to in the event of a catastrophic day?”

Lucy commented on the privatised power lines that are alleged to have started the Kilmore East fire: “I do know that when the government privatised the electricity, it capped the liability for the privatised companies at \$100 million.”

Retired couple Pam and Andrew Phoenix lost their home in nearby Humevale and are now living at the Kinglake Village while they battle official rehousing guidelines to try and rebuild.

Pam said: “So much for the promise that everything would be rebuilt brick by brick! The new building regulations have meant that our plans to rebuild here have gone by the wayside. For the first six months we were dead keen to rebuild on our block. But these regulations prevented us and the cost factor made us give up the idea. We had to try and find a block somewhere else we could afford, so we have to move to Maldon, which is a lot further from our kids.

“We are still working our way through the paperwork, so it will be at least another 12 months before we have a home,

maybe more. It will be two years on, and we’re 73 years old.

“From the fund everyone got the same amount—\$79,000. It cost us \$140,000 for a block in Maldon and we still have to do excavation and everything else. We would probably get about \$30,000 for our block in Humevale but it was worth \$300,000 before the fires.”

“The builders are frightened to quote,” Pam added. “They don’t want to commit to a contract. There are 167 pages of building regulations they have to understand and are not in a hurry to do anything.

“Windows! They’ve developed a window—a triple glaze ceramic window but quite a small one costs \$1,000. I was used to having beautiful picture windows looking out on the trees and I can’t stand the idea of a tiny window.

“Rural Finances gave us a \$3,000 grant to clear dead trees on our property, but we need \$30,000. It was 7.5 acres in conservation—a garden of beauty—now it is 80 percent dead trees.

“It is classed as an FZ BAL zone because of the hill. [Zoning is determined by the slope, the trees, the type of trees, etc.] It would cost \$300,000 to make it a CFA [Country Fire Authority] access road, with turning circles, parking bays, taps, tanks and so on, before you could build. So we bought elsewhere.

“Our next door neighbours the O’Gormans—husband and wife and their son—lost their lives. They have two surviving children, teenagers, who were not home on the day.

“The family had built a fireproof bunker and after the fire it was found in perfect condition, untouched. Because of the heat from the hill and the flames, they could not get from the back door to the bunker—only about 15 metres. They sheltered on the south side of the house, and were killed. Nobody has looked after their property since. The drainage is a mess—all the road runoff since has been cascading down the hill—and it will require a lot of funding to fix.

“I lived here 31 years before the fire. Now I think to myself: ‘Did we ever live here?’ I couldn’t live here now.”



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