

Early, ominous start to Australian bushfire season

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Confirming predictions of a disastrous Australian bushfire season this year, Sydney's outer western suburbs, its northern fringes, the nearby Blue Mountains and other parts of New South Wales (NSW) were ravaged by major fires last week. By early evening on September 11, some 63 fires—fuelled by dry bush, 70 kilometres per hour winds and record September temperatures exceeding 30 degrees Celsius—were burning across NSW.

Lives and property were threatened by four major fires, including at Winmalee in the Blue Mountains and in Sydney suburbs. Several homes were damaged and one destroyed near Blacktown. Residents in these areas, as well as students and staff at a University of Western Sydney campus, were advised to evacuate.

More than 3,000 homes in the Richmond and Londonderry areas lost electricity, and smoke closed the M1 motorway during peak hour. There were also serious blazes in Cessnock, Wyong, Bathurst, the Snowy Mountains, the Bega Valley on the south coast and the Clarence Valley on the north coast.

Although a cool change helped fire fighters in Sydney and the Blue Mountains later that night, over 1,000 fire fighters and 14 helicopters were deployed throughout the state. No lives were lost, but a number of fire fighters were treated for burns and serious smoke inhalation, and one was hospitalised with chest pains. Some of the blazes are believed to have been ignited by hazard reduction fires that escalated out of control.

The fires indicate that this summer could be one of the country's worst for bushfires. The Bureau of Meteorology reported that high September temperatures were “on the back of an exceptionally warm period for Australia, with above average mean temperatures affecting the entire nation. This warmth has culminated in Australia's hottest 12-month period

on record.” In late 2011, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) and the Bureau of Meteorology warned that climate change was increasing bushfire risk across southeast Australia. According to the CSIRO, Forest Fire Danger Index days will increase in frequency from 4 to 25 percent of the year by 2020.

Last summer, in January, record temperatures and tinder box conditions fuelled major fires in Tasmania and across NSW, Victoria and South Australia. In 2009, catastrophic Victorian bushfires killed 173 people and incinerated 200 homes. Yet Australian governments—federal and state, Liberal and Labor—continue to slash the country's inadequate fire and emergency services.

In 2012, more than \$60 million was cut from the fire-fighting budget in Victoria. In Queensland, fire fighters' jobs have been slashed. In NSW, the state government has scheduled \$70 million in cuts to fire and emergency services over four years. The NSW cuts include “temporary off-lining”, or TOLing of fire stations, to avoid paying overtime to cover staff shortages. Entire stations are placed on TOL if a single staff member goes on leave or is sick.

Last week, at the height of the NSW fires, the Camden, Riverwood, Miranda, Mona Vale and Ryde fire stations, all adjoining the bushfire-ravaged areas, were closed by TOLing.

Governments and the corporate media continue to claim that the central responsibility for dealing with bushfires lies with individuals and local residents. Those living in fire-prone areas are increasingly left to fend for themselves because the provision of adequate, up-to-date emergency services and trained full-time fire fighters is incompatible with the private profit system. Australian bushfire fighting services, in fact, largely

depend on volunteers.

World Socialist Web Site reporters last week visited Winmalee, one of the worst affected areas, where residents recounted how close the situation had come to a major disaster.

Helena, a Winmalee resident for 25 years, said it was “very scary” that the bushfire season had begun so early. “The first warm weather and we have a fire,” she said.

The fire “jumped” Hawkesbury Road, she explained, and residents were directed to evacuate their homes. “I was in bed asleep, as I work night shift, but my girls woke me up. Otherwise I would have slept through. They got the message on their mobile phones and said we needed to go.”

Jessica said: “I got a phone call at 2.30 p.m. from my neighbour who was stuck because they had closed the road. But my dad was home alone. Everyone was made to do a U-turn or park at the local school. We couldn’t get back home until Wednesday morning... I stayed at a friend’s house because I had nowhere else to stay.

“The power went out on Tuesday afternoon until Thursday night. My mother is on oxygen support 24/7 and if we don’t have power, it’s very difficult. When the fire brigade arrived my father was outside hosing the house.”

Nigel, a painter, was minding children at his ex-wife’s house when the fires erupted. “When I saw white smoke moving really quickly, I knew that meant the fire was very close. It was very windy and the wind direction changed. We saw the fire brigade drive past and police came and asked us to make a decision to stay or go. So I started hosing the house. The next door neighbour wasn’t home, so I hosed her house as well.

“By the time we got the cats together and got ready to go, we had to drive through a wall of fire...I saw the neighbour’s car and boat explode. We were driving through blackness and flame.”

Watching television later that night he thought the house had been incinerated. “The fire got as far as the front door and burnt everything in its path, and then it started at back, so all the back bush is burnt as well.”

Nigel praised the fire fighters: “[Fire prevention services] have been back-burning. If they don’t, they get the blame and if they do, they get the blame as well. It’s easy to point fingers, but all I can say is that the fire fighters were brilliant.”

Nigel said global warming was a serious issue: “I only noticed one frost this winter... You see the Amazon [River]; we can’t keep logging. I think there will be bigger and worse disasters around the world.”



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