

Australia: Bushfire emergency in New South Wales

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New South Wales (NSW) Liberal Premier Barry O'Farrell declared a 30-day state of emergency across the state yesterday, giving special coercive powers to all emergency services, including the imposition of forced mass evacuations and wider arrest powers against those not following police and emergency service directives.

The decision came after fire-fighting authorities warned that three major fires in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney—at Lithgow, Springwood and Mount Victoria—could merge into a giant blaze encompassing thousands of hectares and require the evacuation of tens of thousands of residents. More than 76,000 people live in the Blue Mountains.

A fire of this magnitude would hit the main towns in the Blue Mountains, such as Katoomba and Leura, and devastate communities in the west and north-western edges of Sydney, the state capital. Residents of several smaller Blue Mountains' townships have already been ordered to leave their homes and three schools have been closed.

Last week, more than 200 homes were destroyed, 120 badly damaged and over 100,000 hectares burnt by intense blazes that hit the state. The worst destruction of houses occurred in Winmalee, Springwood and Yellow Rock. (See: "Major bushfires hit Australia's most populous state")

This damage, however, could soon be dwarfed as high temperatures and gusty winds peak on Wednesday, creating the conditions for a mega-fire in the tinder-dry bushland. Currently there are 56 bushfires still burning in NSW, and 12 of these are out of control. There was no rain in fire-affected areas during the weekend and none is likely to fall in the next five days.

Members of the overstretched and predominantly

voluntary Rural Fire Service (RFS) spent the weekend attempting to build containment lines ahead of the predicted hot and windy weather.

RFS Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons told the media yesterday that the situation was "extremely serious" and that fire crews were in "unchartered territory." He explained: "You've got to go back decades before you see any fires of this parallel. What is fundamentally different today to all those decades past, is that there's a hell of a lot more people settled across these at risk areas than there was back in the '50s or '60s."

In November and December 1968, fires in NSW raged in the Blue Mountains, the outlying areas of Sydney, and the South Coast for four weeks, burning out more than a million hectares. At least 200 buildings were destroyed and, while figures vary, about 14 people were killed.

There have been no official statements on what precipitated the latest Blue Mountains fires. However, an internal Defence Department investigation is currently underway as to whether there is a link between the Lithgow blaze and an explosives training exercise at the Marrangaroo training area. The exercise was on Wednesday, the same day the fire broke out in Lithgow.

Fairfax Media has also reported that the 30-metre high fire that devastated almost 200 homes in Springwood, Winmalee and Yellow Rock was started by Endeavour Energy power lines sparking near a tree. The area has been declared a crime site and is being investigated by the police.

According to the royal commission investigation into Victoria's 2009 Black Saturday fires, electricity faults spark more than 200 fires in that state each year. The investigation warned that the number of fires would

increase unless the state government and electricity distributors took “urgent preventative action.”

The response of the federal and state governments and the corporate media to the plight of hundreds of traumatised fire victims and their families is entirely predictable: a combination of callous indifference towards the survivors and a deafening silence about the budget-cutting decisions that have worsened the catastrophe.

While praising the undoubted heroism of the firefighters and emergency workers, the media has said nothing about the disastrous impact of cuts to fire and emergency authorities, back-burning and other fire prevention services by Liberal and Labor governments throughout Australia, state and federal alike. (See: “Australian fire-fighting budget cuts place lives at risk”)

Editorial comments on October 19 cynically claimed that there were “positives” in the disaster and that government “relief was in train.”

The *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial, for example, hailed Prime Minister Tony Abbott for his “unheralded volunteer work” and told its readers: “We should remember the positives even as we express sympathy for those who have lost a home. Bushfires help define Australia ... they remind us that that we are a community, with a need to help each other, and that our communities do rally when natural disaster threatens.”

An *Australian* editorial declared that “Australians are getting better at bushfire management and planning ... lessons were learned in the wake of the 2009 Victorian calamity.”

These cynical statements will not assure fire survivors whose lives have already been turned upside down in the past week, nor those who face renewed dangers in the next days and during the approaching summer fire season.

Federal and state authorities provide grossly inadequate and diminishing funding to fire fighting services and brush aside demands for additional full-time firefighters, coordinated national action, properly resourced evacuation facilities and other rudimentary fire safety measures.

Contrary to the newspaper editorials, demands for increased resources to these fire and emergency services following Victoria’s Black Saturday fires, including the necessity to place power-lines

underground, have been largely ignored at the cost of the homes, livelihoods and health of thousands of ordinary people in bush fire affected regions throughout Australia.

As for the government’s “emergency” relief, under legislation implemented by the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments, fire survivors are only entitled to a one-off payment of \$1,000 per adult and \$400 per child. This pittance will do nothing for the fire victims and their families.

In fact, the recently elected federal Liberal-National government has made it even more difficult for fire survivors. Only those who have lost everything, suffered serious injuries, or whose homes are significantly damaged can receive these so-called “recovery funds.” Those who have been forced to leave their homes are ineligible for any assistance.

As one *Sydney Morning Herald* letter writer noted on Saturday: “I pity the poor victims who have to go through Centrelink for assistance because the mental torture they put you through is worse than any fire. The government puts on a big front on TV but the reality is they will kick your guts in when you’re down.”



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