

# Australia: “Red October” bushfires continue in New South Wales

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Up to 60 bushfires, including 19 uncontained blazes, continue to burn in New South Wales as weather conditions worsen today throughout the state, fanned by mid-30s temperatures, unprecedented for this time of the year, dry bush and gusty winds of up to 100 kilometres per hour. The most serious danger, however, confronts thousands of residents in the Blue Mountains, where over 190 homes were destroyed last Thursday and hundreds remain homeless.

Fire fighters currently face a 1,500-kilometre fire front where three large fires are burning out of control—one at Bilpin, which has linked up with one at Mount Victoria and a third at Springwood. More than 2,500 fire fighters, including almost 1,000 from interstate—the largest mobilisation in NSW’s history—are currently involved. The overwhelming majority are unpaid volunteers.

Light rain yesterday and some overnight rainfall failed to provide any relief. In fact, roads in some key areas became slippery and dangerous, hampering some fire fighting operations last night. Lightning strikes today are expected to worsen the situation and spark numerous spot fires.

This is “as bad as it gets,” Rural Fire Service commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons told the media this morning. “It’s a difficult, dynamic, dangerous fire-ground situation, far worse than what we’ve been talking about for the last few days,” he said. A few hours later a new blaze, near Minmi, west of Newcastle, forced the closure of the M1 Pacific Highway, about 150 kilometres north of Sydney.

All schools, pre-schools and daycare centres in the Blue Mountains are closed today, as well as 18 schools in the Hawkesbury and the Southern Highlands areas. Three nursing homes in Springwood and their 400 residents were evacuated yesterday.

Thousands of anxious Blue Mountains residents have attended community meetings over the past five days. Packed meetings were held last night in Katoomba, the mountains’ largest town, and in the Wingecarribee and Hawkesbury areas, where residents peppered Rural Fire Service authorities with questions about what to do in the face of the escalating fire disaster.

Fire authorities told residents who had no “strong reason to remain” to leave the area by midday today, but said that those

with “a plan” to defend their properties could stay. In other words, residents with no professional fire fighting or emergency skills are being asked to determine whether to stay at their homes in these dangerous conditions.

*World Socialist Web Site* reporters visited Winmalee yesterday. Almost 200 homes were incinerated there and in the nearby Yellow Rock community in a matter of moments when a huge wall of fire hit the area last Thursday afternoon. The blaze moved with such speed and intensity that one group of workers was trapped inside a nursery canteen, fearing they would be killed as the fire raged outside. More than 1,800 people, including hundreds of school children were evacuated to the Springwood Sports Club, with over 100 forced to spend the night there because their homes had been destroyed and they could find no other emergency accommodation.

Yesterday the area was still engulfed in a thick smoke haze, with the constant sound of helicopter water-bombers overhead as scores of residents systematically worked to clear tree branches, undergrowth and anything from around their homes that might provide fuel for windblown bushfire embers.

Only residents are allowed into the most fire-affected streets, such as at Emma Parade, Winmalee, where every house—from numbers 20 to 40—along the street’s western side was destroyed. We were able to visit the previously tranquil Page Court and Moray Street in Winmalee where several homes were incinerated and in complete ruins. The residents of these properties had little chance to save anything.

Moray Street is on the edge of a bush valley. Only two homes were left standing on the southern side of the street. Collapsed brick walls, twisted metal and the burned out remains of cars, refrigerators and items dominated the scene, along with lumps of blackened plastic furniture and broken glass.

**Brad**, who works in auto smash repairs in the outer-western Sydney suburb of Seven Hills rushed back to his Moray Street home on Thursday afternoon. “By the time I arrived,” he explained, it was “well and truly alight. It was intense and there was nothing I could have done about it.”

The home where he and his wife have lived for over 20 years and raised four children was a smoking ruin within minutes, he explained.

“People said to me, why race up here when you wouldn’t be

able to do anything. That's true, but I wanted to see that for myself. There'd always be something at the back of your mind, thinking you could have done something to save the place. Even the firies [rural fire service] were here and they couldn't have stopped the fire. The wind was so strong blowing embers everywhere.

"We've lost everything but we've been lucky we've been able to rent a place from a friend just down the road in the same street and we've got insurance, which gives you have a chance.

"We were due for a clean out," he joked, but then added, "You have to stay positive for the kids. They don't want to see us wavering, that's not good for them."

He said most of the street's residents were not home when the fire struck, but that it would have been impossible for most of them to reach the area of because of roadblocks into Winmalee.

**Lisa**, a teacher who lives in another part of Winmalee, explained that although her home had not been hit by Thursday's blaze, the mid-September fires had burnt up to her back fence. Her house is in a cul-de-sac with bushland on three sides.

"The community is pretty much devastated," she said. "For example, Ellison Public School, just one small primary school, has over 40 families whose homes have been destroyed, and a friend of mine, whose husband recently died of cancer, has just lost her home and family pet that was very precious to her.

"We are a pretty close-knit community and so everyone would know someone who has been affected. Times are difficult and some people don't have insurance. They're going to be doing it tough. I don't know where people are going to be housed. The local motel is apparently full and I know most others are with family and friends."

Lisa, who has lived in the area for 27 years, was very concerned about much larger fires hitting the area this week: "I've looked at the map and we're surrounded by fires. Everyone is anxious and we're just playing a waiting game."

She pointed out, however, that local water pressure and mobile phone reception were serious problems in the area and there was no official evacuation centre. "If you ask people about mobile coverage in Winmalee, half of them will just laugh at you, it's so bad. Evacuation from Winmalee is also a problem," she added. "Last Saturday the fire had got out of control and the main road out of the town was gridlocked for about half an hour when people attempted to quickly get out of the area."

"I've been told that some people have been stopped from getting the \$1,000 emergency relief, which is not enough anyway, and yet we see [Prime Minister] Tony Abbott running around dressed as a fireman and getting his picture in the paper. He turned up here, went to the fire station to get his photo taken, and then he just buggered off. It's horrendous.

"Some people pick up from the media and blame the Greens but I can tell you that they do burn off. That's how the last fire

started, it was a burn off that got out of control. The media says you can't talk about climate change now because we have to stop the fires but now is a really good time to talk about it. It is impacting and it is exactly what has been predicted."

**Barbara**, a retiree, has lived in the town for over 30 years. She told the WSWs she had never seen such intense fires.

"There were big fires here in 1994 and we were evacuated. Because it was a slow moving fire we had some time and then the wind changed and we were OK. Last Thursday we saw the fire at 1.30 p.m. and had to leave by 2 because embers were falling everywhere. We had half an hour basically, and I was only able to get the computer and the deeds to the house packed into the car. Then the grass caught fire behind the car and I'd thought the car would go up.

"My house survived but it's badly damaged—all the downpipes are melted and 11 windows are cracked or broken. All the outside garden furniture is destroyed and the garbage bins are big melted blobs. I have no electricity because the outside insulation on the power lines was melted by the heat."

**Troy**, a Blacktown warehouse operations manager, said that he and his brother-in-law had driven through the fire to reach his home. "I wasn't surprised by the intensity of the fire," he said. "We've had everything up here—high winds, heat and no rain. The other problem is that although there was a backburn here a year ago, they hadn't been any backburning here for about 20 years."

Asked to comment on paltry emergency relief provided by the federal government, and state government cuts to fire fighting services, he said: "\$1,000 is not very much at all. It's not going to take you far these days, so it just means that you have to rely on family and friends to get you over the line.

"As for the fire services, it's obvious the services don't have enough manpower, let alone full-time staff, in a situation like this. [NSW Premier] Barry O'Farrell has cut something like \$68 million from the fire service. It's wrong and I don't know how they justify it. It's not sustained to run any service like this and eventually there's going to be a major disaster.

"I'm also concerned about the volunteers. Every employer is different but a lot of these guys have to take the time they spend fighting fires from their holidays. This isn't right."



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