

West Australian fires expose government failure to provide safe electricity supplies

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Last month, major bushfires swept through the Perth Hills area, about 40 kilometres northeast of the Western Australian state capital, causing the death of a 62-year-old man, incinerating 56 homes and leaving behind an estimated \$13 million in damage to properties and businesses.

According to the state regulator *EnergySafety*, one of the fires began when an electricity power pole collapsed on the property of Noreen Campbell, an 82-year-old widow. The immediate response of the state Liberal government was to blame Campbell for the blaze, claiming that the woman, who has no knowledge of, let alone expertise in, electrical work, should have maintained the “private” power poles on her property.

“You simply cannot tolerate either through tardiness or lack of information, people maintaining dangerous electric gear on their properties,” Western Australian Energy Minister Mike Nahan declared.

Under legislation introduced in Western Australia in 1945—when the state’s population was just over half a million—landowners were required to install, inspect, repair and replace damaged power poles on their property at their own cost. Almost 70 years later and with the state’s population now 2.5 million, the law remains on the books.

The government is cynically exploiting the legislation to absolve itself of any responsibility for maintaining the almost 200,000 so-called “private” power poles in the state. It provides no training or funds to landowners on the issue. Instead, a six-page pamphlet released by *EnergySafety* simply contains various “recommendations.”

Minister Nahan’s statements were issued before any serious investigation into the fire. Recent evidence has emerged suggesting that a faulty meter installed by

electricity provider Western Power, a state government corporation, may have precipitated the fire, which, in turn, caused the pole to collapse. Law firm Slater & Gordon has begun investigations into the “legal rights of residents” and a possible class action against Western Power.

Nahan flatly rejected calls for energy providers to assume some responsibility for the electricity infrastructure. Energy providers had “enough on their plate,” he declared. “I can say categorically neither Western Power nor Horizon Power (which supplies energy in regional areas) will take on responsibility for the maintenance, inspections or upgrades of the poles.”

Nahan’s declarations echo those of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who declared in 1987—as her Tory government was slashing welfare and other basic social services—that there was “no such thing as society.” Thatcher insisted: “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.”

Thatcher’s comments sought to disown any government responsibility for the many socially necessary tasks inherent in today’s modern, complex society, and devolve them onto the individual. Under this banner, governments around the world have downsized, eliminated or sold off everything from the supply of essentials such as water, gas and electricity to the provision of public transport, hospitals and schools. Public health, environmental and safety standards have been similarly eroded in order to boost private investment and profits.

Power supply in Australia is a prime example. The State Electricity Commission of Victoria was privatised in the 1990s. Singapore Power, through its subsidiary SP Ausnet, now serves as one of the state’s electricity

providers. In Queensland the energy sector was deregulated into 14 companies, with approximately half privately-run.

Electricity in South Australia is divided between two private companies, SA Power Networks and ElectraNet, while in Tasmania the Hydro-Electric Commission was disaggregated into three government-run companies—Hydro Tasmania, Aurora Energy and Transend—in preparation for privatisation.

In Western Australia, Western Power and Horizon Power, which were created out of the break-up of the State Energy Commission in 1995, remain state-owned entities. These corporations, however, are being prepared for privatisation, with the destruction of jobs and conditions. Since 2001, Western Power's workforce has been cut by 37 percent. Today, the utility employs only 2,600 people.

In every case, governments have argued that privatisation is safe and "more efficient," bringing lower costs for ordinary consumers. The opposite is true. Electricity prices continue to climb, providing windfall profits for utility companies. And major fires have been sparked by electricity faults due to lack of maintenance and the refusal of the utilities to bury cables underground.

According to a recent report on ABC-TV's "Four Corners," the most fatal fires in Australia since the 1970s have been caused by electrical faults. Two of the disastrous blazes in Victoria on Black Saturday in 2009 were sparked by high-voltage power lines.

Victoria's largest-ever class action is underway against SP Ausnet, which is accused of being responsible for one of the fires that killed 119 people in 2009. Extensive investigations have revealed that SP Ausnet underfunded its maintenance budget by \$95 million in the seven years up to 2008. It is alleged that this included cuts to basic safety inspection of the high-voltage power lines that precipitated the fire.

The overwhelming majority of electricity in Australia is supplied through overhead cables, including high-voltage power lines across heavy bushland. The safest electricity delivery method is via underground power lines, which virtually eliminate the danger of bush fires caused by electrical faults. While every bushfire prompts demands for power lines to be placed underground, state and federal governments and the power utilities veto the suggestion because it represent

an impost on profits.

The Western Australian government's refusal to maintain power poles on private properties is another demonstration of the incompatibility of essential social needs with a bankrupt and decaying social order ruled by private profit. Access to safe, modern and cheap power and other essential services are basic social rights that the working class must fight for. This can only be advanced as part of the struggle for a socialist program to reorganise society on the basis of human need, not the profits of the ultra-wealthy few.

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