

Australian coal mine fire endangers working-class town

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Residents of Morwell, 130 kilometres east of Melbourne in Victoria, have been left to fend for themselves amid a coal mine fire that has burnt since February 9. Despite health authorities warning about the dangers of the toxic smoke and ash shrouding the town, Morwell's 13,000 people have received virtually no assistance from either the state government or the corporate mine owners.

The open cut coal mine, less than 500 metres from Morwell, is part of the Hazelwood Power station and mine owned by the French transnational corporation GDF Suez. A bushfire spread to disused sections of the mine earlier this month and is now burning over 2.5 kilometres on three different levels of the mine. Fire Services Commissioner Craig Lapsley said the best-case scenario is that the fire will be extinguished within 10 to 14 days, but "the worst-case scenario is a long-term deep-seated fire in coal that's there for some time."

There have been cases internationally of open cut coal mine fires burning for years. Already serious health implications are evident. Ten firefighters have been hospitalised due to carbon monoxide exposure. The smoke, containing fine particle matter, has caused dangerous air pollution. The Environment Protection Authority (EPA) assesses an air quality index figure of 150 as very poor—Morwell's rating has been higher than 1,300.

The air pollution is not just affecting Morwell but has spread to other nearby towns in the Latrobe Valley, which is home to 125,000 people. In addition to the smoke, a layer of fine black ash is falling constantly on people's homes.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with David, a worker in Morwell who lives less than 2 kilometres from the mine with his wife and two children. He

explained that the "inside of the house smells of smoke and feels like a toxic dump. I have been working outside for the last three weeks. You cop it at work and at home. Your body just can't take it." He has experienced low blood pressure and an increased heart rate that his doctor attributes to smoke exposure. David says friends and co-workers are also getting sick from the smoke.

A local doctor told the Australian ABC that at least four or five times the normal number of patients are presenting to his practice with "short breath, dizziness, irritation in the eye, more precipitated asthma." Dr Peter Tait from the Public Health Association of Australia is calling for an inquiry into the health effects of long-term smoke exposure, stating "there are other potential organic compounds in the smoke that open people to risk later down the track of other health conditions."

Victoria's state Liberal government has responded with utter indifference to the threat posed to the working-class communities. Nothing was done during the first week of the fire—initially dust masks were distributed, not by the government but donated by local businesses and a charity. Only after ten days and under public pressure, did the government open a "respite centre" in Morwell where people could escape the smoke and receive medical advice or treatment. According to the *Age*, hundreds of residents have sought treatment, with 60 people receiving assistance yesterday morning alone, suffering symptoms including breathing difficulties.

Some school classes have now been relocated to nearby towns, but the children are returned to Morwell each afternoon.

The government has made clear that it is up to the affected individuals to work out how to respond to the

situation. The government has refused to coordinate an evacuation of the town. Premier Denis Napthine called on Victorians who have holiday homes to make them available to Morwell residents “for a couple of days for a family to have a bit of a break.” The premier made a show on talkback radio of offering his own holiday residence.

Victoria’s chief health officer Rosemary Lester issued warnings that the smoke could worsen existing lung or heart conditions. Last Monday she declared that residents should “stay indoors as much as possible,” adding that it would be “ideal” for people in at-risk groups to “take a break away from the smoke if they can—if they’re able to go and stay with a friend or relative, or even get out of town for a day trip.”

This advice ignores the fact that many residents have work obligations, have nowhere to relocate, and lack financial resources. The town is one of the most impoverished in Victoria and suffers from high unemployment. Like neighbouring towns in the Latrobe Valley, it has been devastated by successive Labor and Liberal governments restructuring and privatising the electricity industry, destroying tens of thousands of jobs.

Local resident David told the WSWS that without an official state of emergency his bank will not freeze his mortgage payments and his insurance company will not pay for the damage to his house. “I can’t just get up and leave without losing my job and house,” he said, “but I feel bad as a parent—should I get my kids out?”

One couple told the *Latrobe Valley Express* they were living on a relative’s couch in a nearby town, as their six-month-old baby was badly smoke affected. However, the Department of Human Services refused them financial assistance for accommodation, because their home was not in a designated “bushfire-affected” area.

The mine’s owner, GDF Suez, is the world’s largest standalone utility, with a net worth of \$129 billion. It angered local residents by not bothering to send a representative to a community meeting in the town on February 19.

Fire Service Commissioner Craig Lapsley said the absence of fire fighting infrastructure at the mine was an “inhibiting factor” in the emergency response. The company denied this, however, and also insisted that part of the disused mine was covered with soil and

grass. This only raises further questions about the safety and regulation of the mine.

Monash University environmental engineering lecturer Gavin Mudd told the *Latrobe Valley Express*: “That entire section of mine has been unused for years—decades in some areas. It should have been completely rehabilitated by now with a clay or soil cover. The question is whether they’ve been allowed to constantly defer the capping of those mines under their mining licence requirements. Either the regulation on the mine in terms of rehabilitation is far too lax, or the policing of it is just not happening.”

The coal mine fire follows the devastating 2009 Victorian bushfires that killed 173 people. In both cases what is revealed is the total absence of any coordinated and long-term government planning around the safety of regional towns and communities, and the utter contempt of the government and entire political establishment for the plight of the working-class residents affected.



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