

# Infrastructure failures exacerbate Australian heatwave conditions

Frank Gaglioti  
13 February 2017

Large parts of Australia, from South Australia to New South Wales (NSW), northern Victoria and Queensland, are experiencing unprecedented heatwave conditions that are being worsened by inadequate infrastructure and emergency services.

While heatwaves are not unknown in Australia, the more than 40 degrees Celsius (104 F) temperatures recorded in many cities and regional centres over the past two weeks have broken previous records.

According to the Bureau of Meteorology, Sydney, Australia's most populous city, experienced its hottest-ever January, with new records broken in the first weeks of February. Western Sydney suburbs reached 46.9 C on Saturday and the statewide average maximum temperature hit 44.02 C, the highest ever recorded.

Cities in rural NSW, such as Moree and Walgett, have experienced close to 50 consecutive days of temperatures over 35 degrees. Temperatures have climbed to over 40 C in many cities and towns in South Australia and Queensland during the past fortnight.

Australian Bureau of Meteorology senior forecaster Stephen Wood said: "To have such a large area [of Australia] with temperatures above 40C, and for so long, is definitely unusual ... large areas are going to suffer through the pain of it, unfortunately."

These temperatures, and the combination of wind and humidity, have produced dangerous fire conditions in NSW, which were officially rated as "catastrophic" by the state's Rural Fire Service (RFS). On Saturday, RFS commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons said the fire danger was "off the old scale. It is without precedent in NSW."

Yesterday 87 fires were raging across NSW, with 25 not contained and five given emergency warning status. The RFS, made up mainly of volunteers, has been overwhelmed by the extent and sweep of the fires.

RFS deputy commissioner Rob Rogers told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: "We can't guarantee to save every house, we can't even guarantee to have a fire truck at every fire. People just need to focus on their own safety today."

Rogers warned that conditions in some parts of the state could be worse than Victoria's Black Saturday fires, Australia's worst fire disaster, in which 173 people died in 2009.

Temperatures have fallen in NSW today, assisting fire fighters to bring a number of fires under control. Thousands of hectares in the state's central west and the north, however, have been incinerated. The small community of Uarby in the state's central west was destroyed, but miraculously no deaths were reported anywhere. More high temperatures are expected in NSW on Wednesday, again raising the danger of a major fire catastrophe.

Young children, the sick, the elderly and those unable to afford air conditioners were highly vulnerable to the heatwave, yet no heat-related deaths have been reported. That is because no real figures have been released by government or medical authorities.

So far, the media has only reported that 200 people were treated for heat-related symptoms in South Australia last week and Queensland ambulance services on Friday treated 16 teenagers. Three high school students were hospitalised in Brisbane, the state's capital.

In the 2009 heatwave that struck the southern states of Australia, thousands of people, mostly elderly, were treated by ambulance services. Victoria's chief health officer, Dr John Carnie, estimated that over 370 people died as a result of the heat. In 2014, more than 160 were killed by that year's heatwave.

The dangerously hot conditions and the inability of

tens of thousands of people to cope with them have highlighted the lack of reliable energy supplies and other vital infrastructure.

Last week, the Australian Energy Market Operator (AEMO) blacked out supplies to various heat-affected areas. Such practices are euphemistically called “load shedding.”

On February 8, the AEMO ordered the shutdown of electricity to 90,000 homes in South Australia for 45 minutes while people were enduring temperatures of 42 C. According to AEMO, there was not enough supply to meet demand.

The federal government later claimed the problem was caused by South Australia’s near 30 percent reliance on renewable energy supplies—wind and solar power.

These claims were bogus. It was later revealed that a gas power generator at South Australia’s Pelican Point had extra power generating capacity but was not turned on.

Late last week, the NSW government warned residents and small businesses that unless they reduced their energy use, particularly during peak demand periods between 4.30 p.m. and 6.30 p.m., power supplies would be cut.

NSW Energy Minister Don Harwin warned residents against using power. “Rather than going straight home,” he suggested, people might “want to consider going to a movie, going out to a shopping centre, keeping the load low.” In effect, the population is being made responsible for inadequate supplies of electricity.

In reality, in the largely privatised energy market, power-generating companies decide whether or not to sell their electricity, depending on the prices they can extract by exploiting demand peaks. Australia’s electricity market is one of the most deregulated in the world. As a result, the adequacy of the electricity supply—an essential ingredient of modern life especially in times of extreme weather—is determined by profit, not social need.

The record temperatures are further evidence of global warming and its implications, which include extreme, irregular and dangerous weather patterns.

According to the Bureau of Meteorology’s 2016 annual Climate Statement, last year was the fourth hottest year on record for Australia. Australian Climate Council scientist Professor Will Steffen warned that

extreme weather events would worsen as the climate warmed.

Extreme heat must be “taken really seriously,” Steffen commented. “It is a risk for human health, particularly for the most vulnerable—the elderly, very young people, and exposed outdoor workers ... It is obviously a risk for the agricultural industry, it is a risk for natural ecosystems.”

As parts of southeastern Australia experienced a heatwave, people in Western Australia were hit by a major flood emergency. Heavy rains forced people to abandon their homes and properties in parts of the wheat belt and southwest regions of the state. And yesterday, mountains in southern Tasmania had snowfalls.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**