

Australia: Workers stop work in response to hazardous air conditions

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The Air Quality Index (AQI) in Sydney, Australia's largest city, yesterday registered over 11 times the official "hazardous level" in places, due to the sheer volume and density of smoke blowing in from bushfires raging to the city's west, north and south.

As the toxic haze enveloped the city, workers at a number of construction sites stopped work by 10.30 a.m. and walked off the job. Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) state secretary Darren Greenfield told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "I would say it is in the thousands. It is the worst day we have had."

The Electrical Trades Union (ETU) reported that up to 1,000 electricians and apprentices had left building sites, including at Central Station and Westmead Hospital. "Most sites have left and gone home after having safety checks... Bushfire smoke is especially hazardous for those doing strenuous outdoor work," ETU national secretary Allen Hicks told the newspaper.

Unions NSW, the state's peak union body, sent out a tweet "advising all non-essential workers to work indoors or from home" and told a business web site it would "stick up for any worker who wants to down tools." Unions NSW assistant secretary Thomas Costa said nobody, apart from emergency service workers who had accepted the risk, should be forced to work outside.

Last Thursday as well, when smoke haze in almost all parts of Sydney reached hazardous levels, about 100 waterfront workers walked off at Port Botany, with DP World responding by standing them down without pay for breaching the dispute resolution procedures under its enterprise agreement with the CFMMEU.

Yesterday's expressions of concern from union bureaucrats, no doubt prompted by a groundswell of anger among their members, are entirely cynical. It was

left up to individual work sites and workers to decide to stop work and risk retaliatory action. The unions are directly responsible for the erosion over decades of health and safety conditions on building sites, including in hazardous weather conditions.

Hundreds of thousands of other workers were left by their employers, the trade unions and government authorities to endure the conditions. In underground railway stations and some office blocks, the smoke was so thick it set off fire alarms, but workers were sent back inside buildings once alarms were checked. Outdoor employees were kept working, not only in dangerous levels of air pollution, but temperatures that passed 40 degrees Celsius in many suburbs. In most cases, schools were not closed.

This was the response despite an official press release from the New South Wales (NSW) state government's Department of Health warning that the combination of pollution and extreme heat was "a recipe for severe illness unless people take simple precautions."

The simplest precaution is doing as little physical activity as possible, staying hydrated and remaining indoors in the most ventilated and cool environment available. For infants, elderly people and those with underlying heart and respiratory conditions, taking this action can be matter of life and death.

Images have been viewed around the world of Sydney's landmarks barely visible through the haze of smoke, including the Opera House and Harbour Bridge, as well as beaches and motorways. Ferry services in the harbour were cancelled due to poor visibility.

Across the country, national and state parks and bushland have gone up in flames since September, including in areas where fire is unusual, such as tropical and sub-tropical rainforests. Historically, the most severe and costly period for bushfires, especially in

Australia's southern states, is late December to late February, but this "fire season" began far earlier.

As of yesterday afternoon, at least 85 separate fires were burning in NSW alone, of which 42 remained classified by the fire services as "uncontrolled." Rural Fire Service deputy commissioner Rob Rogers tweeted today that 724 homes have been destroyed and 2.7 million hectares (5.7 million acres) burnt out since September. Scores of properties have been lost and vast areas of bushland ravaged in neighbouring Queensland.

People in Sydney, and regional cities and towns, have experienced air pollution at dangerous levels for weeks. NSW Ambulance services reported a 30 percent increase in calls for assistance in the first week of December, and the state's hospitals have reported a 25 percent surge in emergency ward admissions.

Australia, like virtually every part of the world, lacks the infrastructure and planning to cope with the realities of climate change. The continent has been impacted by a steady rise in average temperatures.

The lack of preparation is coming into public consciousness. One glaring issue is the reliance on rural fire brigades made up almost entirely of volunteers, due to decades of underfunding and budget cuts to professional services. Moreover, the support networks for the firefighters—providing food, rest facilities and counselling—depend almost entirely on community groups and religious charities.

While there are some 290,000 registered volunteer firefighters across the country, their ability to remain in the field or travel away from their homes is limited by the demands of their employment and personal situations. Many volunteers work in, or provide services to, the agricultural sector, and are struggling to make ends meet as drought compounds the protracted economic slump in regional areas.

Lee Johnson, the former head of the Queensland Fire and Emergency Service, told the *Guardian* yesterday: "Volunteers are under a great deal of strain, no doubt about it, and that's impacting their personal circumstances. What your regional communities are going through is putting a great strain on the economy and wellbeing of those communities... When we're asking people to fight fires in a season extending months, that's a big ask for free labour. The real worry is, is it going to be the same again next year?"

Greg Mullins, former head of the NSW Rural Fire

Service, added that volunteers with jobs and responsibilities were already being asked to work consecutive 12-hour shifts. He warned: "It's not even the peak season yet and fires haven't come into suburbia yet, which is historically where the worst losses have been."

Johnson and Mullins made their comments partly in response to the indifference Prime Minister Scott Morrison showed to the pressure on volunteer fire fighters. Answering a journalist's question as to how long the volunteers could be expected to work without any pay, Morrison said: "The fact is these crews, yes, they're tired, but they also want to be out there defending their communities... We do all we can to rotate their shifts, to give them those breaks... In many cases you've got to hold them back to make sure they get that rest!"

Morrison dismissed out-of-hand any suggestion that the number of professional firefighters be substantially increased. He asserted: "To professionalise at that scale is not a matter that has been previously accepted and it's not currently under consideration by the government."

Morrison also has maintained his strident refusal to acknowledge that the scale of the bushfires poses the necessity for rapid action to reduce fossil fuel emissions. In media comments this week, the prime minister stated: "I think to suggest that at just 1.3 percent of emissions, that Australia doing something more or less would change the fire outcome this season. I don't think that stands up to any credible scientific evidence at all."

In fact, there is irrefutable scientific evidence of the complex but known links between emissions, climate change, extreme weather conditions and calamitous bushfires. The issue is not that reducing emissions would alter the situation "this season," but that the scale of reductions reluctantly agreed by governments such as Australia's is woefully inadequate to avert catastrophic climatic consequences.



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