

Australian fires bring growing global climate crisis into stark relief

James Cogan
23 December 2019

Fires claimed more lives and property across Australia over the weekend, while once again blanketing cities such as Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane in dense clouds of smoke. More than 200 major fires are still burning out-of-control and, with extreme heat and no significant rainfall predicted in much of the country, the situation is expected to worsen over the coming weeks and months.

Towns and hamlets in the Adelaide Hills suffered some of the greatest devastation, as fire tore through farms and vineyards. South Australian Premier Steven Marshall reported that at least 86 homes were destroyed, along with hundreds of outbuildings and vehicles. Ron Selth, 69-years-old, was killed while he attempted to defend his home from the flames in the small township of Charleston. Firefighters and residents were injured trying to protect property.

In New South Wales (NSW), an extensive area of forest is burning in the mountain ranges, in what are now the largest fires in the state's history. Since September, some 2.7 million hectares have gone up in flame. The 70,000-strong volunteer Rural Fire Service (RFS) has been stretched to breaking point mobilising the personnel to fight fire fronts that are more than 11,000 kilometres in length.

On Saturday, naval helicopters had to be called in to rescue people threatened by fire into the coastal communities of Fisherman's Paradise and Sassafras to the south of Sydney. On Thursday night, two volunteer firefighters from Sydney were killed and three injured in a vehicle accident while fighting the fires in the nearby town of Buxton.

More than 60 fires are burning in south east Queensland. In Victoria, huge fires are raging in forests in Gippsland, to the east of Melbourne. In Western Australia, an out-of-control bushfire north of Perth had burnt more than 11,000 hectares with residents on

Saturday being urged to leave while they still could.

Nationally, some 1,000 homes have been destroyed so far in the 2019–2020 fire season, with the traditionally worst period in January and February still to come. Thousands of unpaid volunteer firefighters have suffered major financial losses due to being repeatedly asked to take time off from their employment. Dozens have been injured.

The extensive fires in Australia follow the blazes that have engulfed large areas of California, Siberia, Borneo and the Amazon. In Siberia alone, Greenpeace estimates that some 12 million hectares have been burnt out this year. The unprecedented character of fires in country after country highlights the growing danger to humanity of global climate change.

The fire emergency brings into stark relief the lack of conscious planning and preparation, at both the national and state level, for the impact of climate change. Capitalist governments around the world, to protect corporate profit and the fortunes of the wealthy, have blocked any serious reductions in carbon emissions and left their populations to face the consequences.

The Climate Council report, *The Facts about Bushfires and Climate Change* published in November 2019, stated: “[F]or well over 20 years, scientists have warned that climate change would increase the risk of extreme bushfires in Australia. This warning was accurate. Scientists expect extreme fire weather will continue to become more frequent and severe without substantial and rapid action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.”

Firefighters have drawn similar conclusions in line with the science. The former chief of NSW Fire and Rescue Greg Mullins told the *Guardian*: “Just a 1 Celsius temperature rise has meant the extremes are far more extreme, and it is placing lives at risk, including firefighters. Climate change has supercharged the bushfire problem.”

Highlighting the degree to which the continent is drying, tropical rainforest in northern NSW and Queensland, where fires historically did not take hold, have gone up in flames this year.

Craig Lapsley, the former emergency management commissioner in Victoria, told the media on December 17: “We’ve got fires in multiple states now and potentially we’ll have fires in all states and territories in the end of December, January and February, which is a first for Australia. That is a turning point. That’s telling us it is different.”

The lack of preparation for this “new normal” is graphically shown in the reliance on volunteer firefighting services with insufficient funding and equipment. While tens of billions of dollars have been spent equipping the Australian military with everything from mini-aircraft carriers, to F-35 jet fighters and new combat vehicles, no serious investment has taken place to equip firefighting services with state-of-the-art aircraft, helicopters and trucks and staff them with well-paid, highly-trained professionals.

Several former heads of the emergency services spoke on their concerns in a feature published in the December 21 edition of the *Saturday Paper*.

Naomi Brown, previously chief executive of the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council, told the paper: “The way we’re dealing with fires now has been terrific, it has worked for many years. It is now unsustainable. The need for volunteers 24 hours a day, months on end, is going to make life very, very difficult. There is no doubt we need a national look at this. We need a serious plan.”

Greg Mullins noted: “One of the problems for resourcing firefighters at the moment is that we lease large aircraft from the USA. Other countries are after them, like Chile. We have to get in early to get enough of them.”

Traditionally, both aerial and ground firefighting resources have been able to be shifted from state to state, and even from country to country. Australian firefighting crews often deploy to the US, for example, and vice versa. Under conditions in which major blazes are taking place simultaneously, this is increasingly not possible. The fire season began this year in Australia in September, when California was ablaze.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison, a climate change sceptic, is currently the target of much of the anger over the decades of political indifference to the development of more extreme fire dangers.

On December 10, he dismissed the prospect of paying volunteer firefighters on the grounds that “they want to be out there defending their communities.” Two days later, he rejected the 2020 Climate Change Performance Index that ranked the Australian government’s efforts to curb greenhouse gas emissions as the worst performing internationally.

“What we cannot say, what no one can say, is those programs (to reduce greenhouse gasses), of themselves, are in any way directly linked to any fire event,” Morrison declared.

In reality, south east Australia has become progressively drier since the 1990s, with a 15 percent decline in late autumn and early winter rainfall and a 25 percent decline in average rainfall in April and May. Average temperatures have increased across the country, and lead to more frequent extreme fire conditions.

December 17, 2019, experienced the hottest ever recorded national average temperature of 41.9 degrees Celsius (107.4 degrees Fahrenheit). The previous recorded high was 40.9C on December 16, which exceeded the 40.3C registered in January 2013.

Morrison only stoked public outrage by secretly going on Christmas holidays in Hawaii as much of the country burned and the major cities were choked in toxic smoke. In the face of a storm of criticism, he went into damage control, issuing a public apology on Friday and returning to Australia to meet with the families of the two firefighters who lost their lives.

Morrison’s attitude is simply a graphic example of the contempt and indifference of governments, not only in Australia, to the impact of climate change on the lives of millions of people. Under capitalism, corporate profits and the competing national interests of rival ruling classes block any rationale plan to address this global disaster.

The necessary political changes depend upon the working class taking matters into its own hands. Society on a world scale must be completely reorganised on the basis of socialist planning, to achieve massive reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and to counter for the myriad consequences of global warming.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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