

Australian bushfire catastrophe exposes the contempt of the ruling elites for working people

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8 January 2020

The duration and extent of the fires raging across Australia have shocked millions of people, not only in the country itself, but around the world.

Since late August, an unprecedented 8.4 million hectares of bush and prime agricultural land has gone up in flames. Some 2000 homes have been destroyed and at least 25 lives lost. Hundreds of millions of wild animals have been killed and incalculable ecological destruction wrought. And the January–March period of the fire season, when the worst and most destructive fires have historically occurred, has only begun.

For weeks, a large proportion of the population has been forced to go about their daily lives with the acrid smell of smoke containing hazardous levels of toxic particles. Cities such as Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and the national capital Canberra are regularly the most polluted urban centres on earth. Smoke from the massive Australian blazes is shrouding New Zealand's cities and has reached South America.

Politically, however, the most significant and enduring aspect of the 2019–2020 fire crisis is that it has laid bare the gulf between the working class majority and the minuscule financial and corporate oligarchy that controls the productive forces and dictates the policies of government.

The representatives of the French aristocracy, on the eve of the 1789 revolution, are remembered for having advised a starving and rebellious population to eat cake. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison will go down in history as the political leader who secretly went on holiday to Hawaii last month, while the country burned.

Morrison epitomises the political type that has emerged to impose the dictates of the capitalist oligarchs. Like his counterparts internationally—from

Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, and Shinzo Abe, to Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin and Narendra Modi—he tries to portray himself as a man of the people, while ensuring that the wealthy few continue to amass their obscene riches.

Morrison has built his political credentials with the Australian ruling elite through right-wing demands for corporate and personal income tax cuts, the abolition of social programs, and the slashing of wages and working conditions.

For at least three decades, climate scientists have documented, with increasing alarm, how global warming caused by greenhouse gas emissions is fundamentally altering world weather patterns. In regard to Australia, warning after warning has been issued that the further drying out of large tracts of what was already the driest continent would vastly increase the regularity, scope and intensity of fire events.

Yet Morrison is notorious for dismissing these concerns and denying the need to reduce fossil-fuel use, so as to protect the vested corporate interests of the coal and associated energy industries. For months, he continued to dismiss the fires as the natural cycle in Australia, with no relationship to global warming.

On his return from his holiday in Hawaii, Morrison denounced a tweet by teenager Greta Thunberg, calling for greater emissions reductions as “reckless” and not in Australia's economic interests—that is, the interests of the mining conglomerates and the banks that underwrite their vast operations.

On January 2, however, Morrison was brought face-to-face with the mass popular anger that is burgeoning over the inaction and indifference of his government, and the entire political establishment, towards the

bushfire catastrophe. Working class residents in the fire-devastated town of Cobargo refused to shake his hand, shouted abuse and demanded that he leave.

The encounter in Cobargo revealed the state of class relations in Australia. The fire crisis is triggering the type of shift in popular consciousness that has led to mass struggles and protests in country after country—from France and North Africa to Chile and India—demanding the removal of governments and an end to the relentless attacks on the social position of the working class. Trust in the official establishment is collapsing.

In the days since Cobargo, Morrison has gone into damage control to try to shore up the credibility and authority of the government. He now claims to take the threat of climate change seriously and has promised to meet “whatever costs we need” to assist devastated communities. Most ominously, his discredited government has mobilised thousands of military personnel to try and take control of disaster relief in the most affected areas, where anger is the greatest and ordinary people have concluded they need to organise for themselves.

The political situation, however, has changed permanently. In the eyes of millions of workers and young people, Morrison and his government are not fit to rule. The opposition Labor Party has held power for 19 of the past 37 years, and has proven it is just as beholden to corporate profit interests as the Coalition. It is just as culpable for the lack of any serious action on climate change and the rundown of essential services, including those involved in firefighting. For weeks, opposition leader Anthony Albanese has voiced only mild criticisms of the government over its handling of the bushfire emergency, in the name of national unity.

A crisis always lays bare the essential character of class relations. The disdain and indifference of the Australian political establishment towards the lives and well-being of ordinary working people, amid the flames engulfing entire communities, finds its reflection around the world. It recalls President Trump’s attitude to hurricane-stricken Puerto Rico in 2017, which he initially dismissed as not being a real catastrophe, before flying in for a photo-op and tossing what he called “beautiful, soft paper towels” to desperate onlookers.

The capitalist elite everywhere, with the short-

sightedness and indifference of outmoded and reactionary ruling classes throughout history, has insisted that their narrow, national profit interests must take priority over the interests of society as a whole.

The great political task in Australia and around the world is the development of an internationalist and socialist movement and leadership in the working class. None of the enormous threats and challenges that face the working class—social inequality, the destruction of democratic rights, global warming and its consequences, and the immense danger of war—can even begin to be answered unless the capitalist profit system, and nation-state divisions and rivalries, are ended.

The working class must, and can, take matters into its own hands and initiate a conscious revolutionary struggle to achieve the transformation of global economic and social life, including the expropriation of the banks and major corporations into public ownership and democratic control, and a vast redistribution of wealth.

This perspective is outlined in the New Year statement published by the *World Socialist Web Site* on January 3, “The decade of socialist revolution begins.” Now is the time for all those who agree with the fight for a socialist future to make the decision to join the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Parties around the world.



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