

The Australian fire crisis and the necessity for socialism

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The catastrophic fires that have engulfed large areas of Australia starkly demonstrate the failure of capitalism and its political servants at every level of government. The indifference and complacency of political leaders, towards the disaster affecting ordinary working people, is a lesson that will not be forgotten. The political establishment defends a social order in which every aspect of life is subordinated to corporate profit and the interests of a wealthy elite, regardless of the consequences.

With the 2019–20 fire season far from over, regions of Australia resemble nothing so much as war zones, with tens of thousands of people in towns and hamlets cut off from the outside world and highways clogged with traffic, as holiday makers and residents flee terrifying fires. Graphic images of people crowded on beaches, in fear of approaching flames, and ill-equipped fire-fighters confronting towering walls of fire, have provoked shock around the world.

For weeks on end, smoke has blanketed the country's largest cities, such as Sydney, Melbourne and the capital Canberra, and large areas of the rural countryside. Health experts have branded the hazardous air quality as a "public health emergency" and warned of greatly heightened risks to the very young and the elderly, along with sufferers of asthma and other respiratory diseases, as well as other long-term health problems.

To date, at least 26 people have died as a direct result of the fires, mainly in the south-eastern states of New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria. No state, however, has been spared. Across the country, fire has burnt out at least 10.7 million hectares since October—an area larger than the entire land mass of Ireland—and destroyed over 2,100 homes. Stock losses, which are still to be tallied, will be substantial. It is estimated that as many as one billion native mammals, birds and reptiles have been killed, and that some species may be driven to extinction.

With no substantial rain forecast, fires are expected to burn for months, while the hot, dry conditions of summer will almost certainly see the outbreak of dangerous new blazes in areas that have not yet burned.

The political fallout

As the ongoing disaster has escalated, so has frustration and anger with the failure of governments to adequately resource firefighters, provide aid and assistance to those affected, and address the underlying causes of the catastrophic fires, in particular the powerful contributing factor of climate change.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison has deservedly become the target of mass hostility, after he disappeared from view for a secret holiday in Hawaii while much of the country burned. When he did surface, he dismissed the economic hardship endured by the tens of thousands of volunteer firefighters, who have left their jobs and businesses for weeks to fight the fires, and then only belatedly offered them token compensation.

In an attempt at damage control, the Liberal-National Coalition government took the unprecedented step of calling up 3,000 military reservists, followed by an announcement that it would provide \$2 billion in funding for emergency relief and to rebuild infrastructure. These measures are aimed more at saving the political fortunes of the

government than providing real assistance, highlighted by the fact that Morrison did not even bother to consult with fire services as to where and how the military could actually assist.

The opposition parties are no different. Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese has been conspicuous in his refusal to criticise the government—in the name of not politicising a disaster that is, in fact, highly political and potentially explosive. Along with the Greens, Labor has subsequently begun to voice criticisms. But these take the form of advice to the government about how it could defuse popular anger—such as calling a royal commission inquiry or holding a conference with state premiers to give the appearance of doing something.

Anger has erupted very publicly, with those in the thick of the fires venting their frustration in front of the media at both Morrison and Albanese. People have demanded more resources and funding for the volunteer fire services, which have been battling to save lives and property, but have been run down over a protracted period of time.

The very fact that the government's knee-jerk response has been to send in the military underscores the lack of adequately-funded and staffed firefighting services across Australia, as well as the absence of national co-ordination and emergency planning.

The crying need for billions to be allocated to firefighting is just one expression of the desperate crisis facing all essential social services, including public health, education and transport, which have been starved of resources in order to enable tax rates to be slashed for corporations and the wealthy.

Over the past decade, successive Labor and Coalition governments—as part of Australia's alliance with the United States and preparations for a catastrophic war with China—have poured tens of billions of dollars into equipping the military with new warships, jet fighters and other hardware, while declaring there is "no money" to meet the social needs of the working class.

Moreover, the deployment of the military in response to the fires has been accompanied by the invocation of sweeping emergency powers, of a profoundly anti-democratic character, in the worst-hit states of NSW and Victoria.

Ahead of disastrous bushfire conditions on January 4, the Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews took the unprecedented step of declaring a "state of disaster," which gives the minister for emergency services the power to order compulsory evacuations, commandeer vehicles and property, and to override legislation and regulations. In NSW, the Coalition government of Premier Gladys Berejiklian has twice declared a "state of emergency." Such measures are not primarily aimed at protecting vulnerable communities, but at enabling the government and its officials to suppress opposition to their diktats.

The rundown of fire services

The Victorian "state of disaster" legislation was enacted following the state's 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, which claimed the lives of 173 people, destroyed more than 2,000 homes, and burnt out 450,000 hectares

in one day. In an effort to deflect public anger, the state Labor government convened a royal commission. Yet its main recommendations were dismissed as too costly to implement. Under successive Labor and Coalition governments, at both federal and state levels, the necessary resources to reduce fire risk and fight blazes have not been allocated anywhere across the country.

Outside of the major cities and regional towns, the protection of lives and property against bushfires largely falls to volunteer brigades, which are often under-resourced and compelled to fundraise for essential items. In Victoria, the *Weekly Times* reported last year that Country Fire Authority (CFA) funding had been halved. “They have the oldest firefighting fleet in the country with more than 522 tankers and pumpers more than 20 years old,” it stated. Hazard reduction to mitigate against fire risk in state and national parks is left to under-funded government departments and agencies that are forced to fill out their limited staff numbers with contractors.

A Productivity Commission report, released this month, found that there has been a dramatic fall in the number of volunteer firefighters nationally, with almost 17,000 quitting over the past five years. Since the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009, some 5,000 volunteers have left Victoria’s CFA. In NSW, the Rural Fire Service (RFS) has lost 3,000 in the past four years. The long-term decline in rural communities, where job opportunities and services have been gutted, has contributed to shrinking, ageing volunteer fire services.

A Climate Council report in 2015 advised that professional firefighter numbers should be doubled to at least 22,000 by 2030, to cope with more severe bushfire seasons. It called for greater investment in sophisticated fire-fighting equipment and warned that the longer fire seasons in both the US and Australia would lead to overlapping, putting strains on the current sharing of crucial fire-fighting aircraft.

In April 2019, 23 former fire and other emergency services officials wrote to the Morrison government, warning that the coming fire season would be catastrophic. They called for a national summit to take immediate steps, such as substantially increasing the number of fire-fighting aircraft that would be operational over Australia. Like previous warnings, their letter was ignored.

Climate change

The extent of the fires ravaging Australia has sounded alarm bells internationally that the globe is on the brink of fundamental climatic changes that will have devastating consequences. While it is not possible to make a direct causal link between global warming and the outbreak of specific fires, it is undeniable that the hotter, drier conditions across the Australian continent are the major contributing factor.

Australia has always been a country prone to drought and fire, but the annual fire seasons are becoming longer and more dangerous, due to global warming. According to the Bureau of Meteorology, Australian temperatures have risen by 1.4 degrees Celsius since 1910, with most of the increase taking place since 1950. 2019 was both the hottest year on record in Australia, and the year with the lowest recorded rainfall. The 10 hottest years on record have all occurred in the 14 years since 2005. The current fire season began in late August—months earlier than normal—and is expected to continue to March.

Large tracts of the planet face heightened fire risks due to rising temperatures. Last year, out-of-control blazes raged across California, southern Europe, the Amazon, Central Africa, Borneo and Siberia, causing immense destruction, polluting the air breathed by hundreds of millions of people, and vastly increasing global carbon emissions.

The immensity of the Australian fires underscores the international warnings that global warming is approaching a point of no return. In its January 3 perspective, entitled “The decade of socialist revolution begins,” the *World Socialist Web Site* cited the November 2019 statement, signed by 11,000 scientists, which declared that the world confronted “a

climate emergency” because four decades of global negotiations had failed to stem the increase of greenhouse gas emissions, let alone reduce them.

The report stated: “The climate crisis has arrived and is accelerating faster than most scientists expected. It is more severe than anticipated, threatening natural ecosystems and the fate of humanity.... Especially worrisome, are potential irreversible climate tipping points and nature’s reinforcing feedbacks that could lead to a catastrophic ‘hothouse Earth,’ well beyond the control of humans. These climate chain reactions could cause significant disruptions to ecosystems, society, and economies, potentially making large areas of Earth uninhabitable.”

That the Australian prime minister and his government for weeks denied any link between the fires and global warming, epitomises the organic incapacity of the ruling classes internationally to address, let alone resolve, the climate crisis—even though their own long-term survival is at stake. Morrison, an outspoken champion of the coal industry and fossil fuel use, simply carries out more blatantly the policy of all previous governments in Australia and around the world. The pressing need for urgent, coordinated action to avert catastrophic climate change is continually sacrificed on the altar of private profit and national corporate interests.

The primary obstacle to any serious plan to halt and reverse global warming is the capitalist system itself, and its outmoded division of the globe into rival nation states. Again and again, international climate conferences have foundered on irresolvable conflicts between government representatives, who are determined to defend vested interests at home, leading at best to nobly worded agreements that commit no-one to anything. At the same time, new “green industries” and market-based carbon schemes have sprung up to profit from the inadequate measures that are being taken, while doing nothing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The Global Carbon Project has estimated that these emissions reached an all-time high in 2019. The amount stemming from the use of coal, oil and natural gas increased by another 0.6 percent.

The reaction of working people to the bushfire crisis stands in marked contrast to the indifference of the political establishment. While the watchword of the official emergency regime has been to place responsibility on the individual, to either “leave or stay,” communities on the frontlines of the bushfires have, in many cases, come together to act collectively to fight the fires, and to provide food, shelter and other assistance to those in need. Around the country and the world, tens of millions of dollars have been donated to bushfire relief funds.

This elemental self-organisation by the working class needs to be informed by an internationalist and socialist perspective, and developed into a mass independent movement fighting to take political power. The bushfires in Australia are yet another stark demonstration that the capitalist class and its political parties are not fit to rule.

The Green-type parties around the world offer no alternative or way forward. For over three decades, the Greens have promoted the deluded claim that the financial and corporate elite can be persuaded or pressured to carry out the vast changes necessary, including everything from energy generation to forms of transport. The Greens’ acceptance of capitalist relations and nation-state divisions has, in fact, helped enable the ruling class to brush aside the scientific warnings and bring humanity to the brink of catastrophe.

In Australia, the Greens have supported or entered into big business Labor governments that presided, not only over inaction on climate change, but the ongoing assault on working-class jobs and living standards, widening social inequality, the US-led vendetta against WikiLeaks founder and Australian citizen Julian Assange, the persecution of refugees, the destruction of democratic rights and the ramped-up preparations for war. Green parties internationally have likewise proven that they are part of the official establishment, representing privileged

sections of the upper-middle class who oppose any genuine challenge to the status quo.

There is no question that the vast majority of workers and young people around the world now understand the need for, and want, urgent action. Millions of youth have taken part in the school strikes for climate, initiated by Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg. But as Thunberg herself bluntly stated last December, the protests and appeals to the ruling class to change its policies have “achieved nothing.”

The urgent task in the fight to stem global warming is to unify the international working class into one revolutionary movement, aimed at ending capitalism and the nation-state system. In country after country, workers are already coming into explosive struggles against social inequality and the evisceration of democratic rights, and, in some cases, striving to link up across national borders. The threats of climate change and the danger of world war will likewise motivate mass political mobilisations around the world.

None of the pressing problems that confront the working class can be solved without the establishment of workers’ governments, which will implement the most far-reaching socialist policies. Society on a world scale must be reorganised from top to bottom. The banks and major corporations—particularly the 100 transnational conglomerates responsible for 71 percent of all the planet’s carbon emissions—must be expropriated from their private owners and transformed into public utilities, under the democratic control of the working class. This would enable the rapid implementation of an international plan to radically lower carbon emissions and deploy carbon capture technologies, while protecting the living standards of ordinary people.

The obscene wealth concentrated in the hands of the top 10 percent, and especially the top 1 percent of society, must be redistributed and used to finance the vast development of social services and programs. This would include the establishment of well-funded, highly trained and internationally integrated and coordinated emergency services, to respond to the fires, floods, hurricanes, cyclones and other natural disasters that have been intensified by climate change, and that impact most severely on the working class and poor.

Capitalism cannot be reformed. It must be overthrown and replaced. We urge workers and youth to take up this perspective by applying to join the Socialist Equality Party, as part of the building of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, which alone fights for socialist internationalism.



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