

Australia: Balmoral fire captain labels government response a “national disgrace”

Our reporters
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Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* recently visited Balmoral, southwest of Sydney, to speak with Brendon O'Connor, the captain of the local Rural Fire Service (RFS) brigade. The New South Wales Southern Highlands village was ravaged by fire in December, resulting in the destruction of 22 houses and other long-term damage.

O'Connor said that reliance on flawed computer modelling, to the exclusion of local knowledge, was largely to blame for the devastation at Balmoral.

“Outside people were brought in to do the burn plans, put them together with computer modelling, without even using the right statistics or information first.

“When they did the modelling, they looked at a fire that started in 2013 just down the road in Hall Road, where a branch fell on powerlines virtually in the middle of the village. This started a fire that raced through on an 80-kilometre per hour wind day and was gone to the middle of nowhere in no time. It caused virtually no damage but that's what they modelled off, not a wildfire coming in on a broad front.

“The modelling told them it wouldn't affect us. They believed that the Centre Ridge hazard reduction that was done in April last year would be enough to not allow the fire to come through, or, if it did, it would be very mild. The problem is, [the 4-kilometre stretch] from where the hazard reduction was done to the village was unburnt for 18 years.

“At first they said ‘Yes, we'll do the back-burning,’ and then for some reason they changed their mind and decided we didn't need it.

“In 2001 [when firefighters successfully defended Balmoral] a lot of the hazard reduction was done under the radar. We started a lot of it at night-time, because it wasn't official at that point but it had to be done to protect the village. Our Fire Control Officer made that decision and it saved our village. This time, they completely disregarded this plan that had worked. I argued for nearly two weeks in late November, early December that this would be the outcome.

“Local captains haven't been engaged anywhere I've

gone. We've been following the fires since the beginning of September, and it's been a common occurrence.

“For the majority of people I speak with, there's respect for the commissioner, but it also appears to most of the volunteers that it's all about [senior management] building their empire with the biggest and best of everything and the brigades only getting the crumbs.

“The money that we get in our shire is a pittance considering the amount of brigades we cover. We've got 41 brigades, 40-odd tankers. Most brigades should have three appliances to really be effective at any incident. We have the membership, but we don't have the trucks to take our members. On those three days here, we left well over half our brigade at the station.”

While the 400-plus members of the Balmoral community are eager to begin rebuilding, they are becoming frustrated by the lack of promised government assistance for the urgent tasks of clearing dangerous trees and providing clean water. When our reporters spoke to O'Connor, more than a month after the fire, the official clean-up effort had been stalled for two weeks due to questions over which level of government would foot the bill.

O'Connor said: “From what we were told our shire was getting \$150,000 [from the federal government's \$2 billion relief fund]. That was for cleaning up the debris, the dangerous trees, cleaning up the streets, damaged signage, everything relating to that in public areas. That won't even clear the dangerous trees on Railway Parade. It probably wouldn't even do a quarter of that road. You're looking at around \$3,000 to \$4,000 per tree minimum. Big trees go up to \$5,000 or \$6,000 per tree because of the machinery needed.”

Balmoral is not connected to the state water supply, and the fire left residents' rainwater tanks contaminated with asbestos fibres and ash.

“We're still putting bottled water out through our fire station to all of the residents, they're regularly coming up and getting the bottled drinking water,” O'Connor said. “For showering we don't have much choice, there's

nowhere in the village that won't have [asbestos particles] in its tank. There's not a lot of cleaners, so the guys who are doing it are being kept pretty busy."

O'Connor told the WSWS that some of those who lost their homes were not insured, and more than half discovered after the fire that their insurance would not cover the full replacement value of their home and contents.

"What people don't realise is if they don't have receipts, serial numbers, and photographic proof of what's in your whole property, insurance companies can deny payment. Any receipts or other documentation people had, most of that was lost in the house. A lot of people will get left out with the recovery.

"People are very disappointed and angry. You rely on the insurance companies to give you that information, they're the specialists in their field. People are not being offered the right cover. I guess most people, if they get the right advice, will go along with it."

Some residents were fortunate to have photographed their possessions just days before the fire, after an RFS member raised the need for detailed documentation at a village meeting organised by O'Connor.

In Balmoral, and other bushfire-affected areas, residents have mostly been left to fend for themselves in the absence of any meaningful help from government.

O'Connor said: "Whether it's local, state, or federal government, every response has been too slow. For us to get any government assistance was nearly two and a half weeks after the fire. Even now, little agencies are coming in, but they're not telling anyone. They're turning up at the hall and I'm getting a message from someone asking 'Why isn't anybody here?'"

"I've been asking for counselling for our members since the day after the fire happened, and yes, we've had private people, that I've been able to source, come and do that. Everything that we've had so far has been what we've organised.

"It really is a national disgrace. We were up in Tenterfield and the far north months ago and they've still had no recovery done whatsoever. They're hoping the communities will fix everything."

O'Connor recognised that the bushfire catastrophe was just a sharp manifestation of the broader social crisis confronting workers in Australia and around the world.

He said: "Everything will always affect the working class. We're the cannon fodder. Most people struggle now just to exist—to pay basic bills and feed their families. They talk about healthy eating, but the cheapest food people can get is junk food. Why is that? The same with health care. The elite can get it a lot easier and faster, but the average person is waiting years for basic surgery, and then they're still out of

pocket. Why are we dumbing down our education? I don't know whether it's a suppression of the people to dumb us down, because we are a thinking nation.

"[The major parties] are all involved in it unfortunately. The Labor Party is definitely against the working class and people wanting to better themselves and better the country. They just don't seem to be aligned to the country at all.

"I think a working-class party that can actually have some real say around the world would be a great start. It's the only way I think we're going to get some form of power back to the people. We've been controlled from above by the elite for too long and look where it's got us."

While O'Connor believed some form of investigation into the nationwide bushfire catastrophe is necessary, he was sceptical about the worth of yet another royal commission.

He said: "We saw after Victoria, the Black Saturday fire, \$40 million was spent, and what did we get out of it? Nothing changed. It shows that the working class aren't cared about. We're just here to fund the government, to raise the money, do the work and support the profit system.

"I remember reading the findings after the commission myself. Having been there, I was quite interested to know where that was going to go. We went down there six or seven years later to another fire and nothing had changed.

"I think a workers' inquiry would be a great idea, because that would probably be the only way we're going to get a fair hearing and decision.

"We know what things are out there that we—as a broader community, as the working class—could change. The technology's there, but, of course, for the bigger businesses and for the governments to keep making their money, they won't allow changes to happen, whether it's in health, education, world issues, or the environment. It's all done for a reason to keep us where we are and not allow the people this power. That's what would make this a beautiful world, the people having a say, the common good for the people, not a minority that want to manipulate the world for their own benefits.

"Could you imagine what this world could be if the working class banded together and built as one? How incredible!"



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