Early bushfire crisis a warning of another black summer in Australia

Mike Head
30 October 2023

Dangerous bushfires are blazing across wide areas of the Australian states of Queensland and New South Wales (NSW). Coming so early in the fire season, this crisis points to the continuing failure of Labor and Liberal-National governments alike to protect the population from worsening climate-related disasters.

Four years on from the devastating infernos of 2019?20, which killed nearly 500 people either directly or by smoke, major fires have erupted since September—three months before the official start of summer. This is a warning of another possible catastrophe in the coming months, stretching into 2024.

Hot, dry and windy conditions, linked to the increased dangers of extreme weather produced by global warming, are creating volatile and difficult fire conditions.

As of yesterday, 80 fires were burning across Queensland, from its southern border to the Sunshine Coast, the far-north Cape York and the northwest near Mt Isa. Five "watch and act" alerts remained in place for potential sudden evacuations. There were 75 fires throughout neighbouring NSW, with 22 not contained.

More than 40 homes had been destroyed in the small town of Tara, with a population of less than 2,000, in southern Queensland, about 300 kilometres west of Brisbane. Two residents of the area are known to have died. More than 11,000 hectares (27,200 acres) were scorched around Tara over four days.

Intense heat and wind were predicted to worsen the conditions today and throughout this week. The NSW Rural Fire Service warned yesterday: "With hot dry windy conditions, the majority of the state will experience extreme and high fire danger."

This crisis has been developing for weeks. Over the past seven days alone, firefighters have battled 420 bushfires in Queensland and 130 in NSW, sometimes in stifling temperatures reaching as high as 42 degrees Celsius (108 degrees Fahrenheit). From last month, serious fires also broke out in the Northern Territory.

Queensland Rural Fire Brigade Association chief Justin Choveaux told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that Queensland was in the grips of its worst fire season in 70 years. He spoke of a "generational fire season that is a force of nature" and said, "you can't stop these ones, no matter how many people you throw in front of it."

Media reports are emerging of exhausted firefighters, who are mostly volunteers, a shortage of aerial and other fire-fighting resources, inadequate warnings to residents and insufficient emergency accommodation for those who have lost their homes.

Authorities were said to be investigating complaints that some residents near out-of-control bushfires in southern Queensland, between Tara and Chinchilla, received no emergency alerts telling them to leave. Queensland Police Service Assistant Commissioner Ben Marcus told the ABC that losing cell towers could affect emergency text messages.

Beside the breakdown in communications, Tara residents denounced the lack of emergency accommodation, except in the town of Dalby, about 100 kilometres away.

Queensland's Assistant Fire Commissioner Peter Hollier likened the conditions to those experienced during the 2019?20 "Black Summer" bushfires. At the peak of that disaster, fire services in the state fought more than 90 bushfires at once. Hollier said this year's fires had started even earlier in the year.

During the "Black Summer," fires tore through sub-tropical rainforest areas of Queensland that were previously regarded as relatively immune from major fires—another indicator of the impact of climate change.

Queensland Labor Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk made a photo-op visit last Friday to Dalby, where some Tara victims had arrived. Admitting that "fatigue" was a problem for fire crews, Palaszczuk said almost 50 interstate firefighters had been asked to assist, with more potentially to be recruited from New Zealand.

Palaszczuk said her government was "pulling out all the stops" to assist people but provided no details. She hailed the resilience of locals. This has become the mantra of all governments in response to disasters, effectively placing the

© World Socialist Web Site

burden on residents to overcome the lack of official resources and preparedness.

Likewise, the Queensland Fire and Emergency Services website insists that it is up to residents to either have their own bushfire survival plans or flee their homes. “You should not expect a firefighter at your door,” it warns.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s federal Labor government offered a similarly inadequate response as its Queensland counterpart. Emergency Minister Murray Watt said victims in some areas could access emergency grants.

A family of five could apply for up to $900 and individuals $180 to cover the cost of essential items such as food, clothing and medicine, with up to $5,000 available for households with no insurance. That is of little assistance to those who have lost everything.

The current Labor governments, now in office in all mainland states, have done nothing more than their discredited Liberal-National predecessors to address the danger of another disaster like that of 2019?20.

Those bushfires killed 34 people, including nine firefighters on the fire front, and 445 others who suffered premature death from exposure to smoke, which spread across the continent and around the globe. Almost 6,000 homes and buildings were incinerated and close to 13.7 million hectares of land and 3.5 million hectares of natural forest areas burnt. An estimated one billion animals were killed.

A subsequent royal commission convened by the then Morrison Liberal-National federal government was an exercise in diverting attention away from the root causes in climate change and the capitalist profit system itself. Its terms of reference were also silent about the gross lack of civilian resources, including modern fire-fighting equipment, professional firefighters and evacuation infrastructure.

Scientific submissions about the impact of global warming fell on deaf ears. Experts told the inquiry that climate-change drivers were producing longer and hotter summers and flammable bushland in Australia. These included the El Niño Southern Oscillation in the Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean Dipole and the Southern Annular Mode westerlies that circumnavigate the Antarctic. They said greenhouse gas emissions and ozone depletion over the stratosphere around Antarctica were also factors.

The inquiry’s final report, issued in October 2020, made a passing reference to the climate disaster, presenting it an unavoidable. “Extreme weather has already become more frequent and intense because of climate change; further global warming over the next 20 to 30 years is inevitable,” it stated. “Catastrophic fire conditions may render traditional bushfire prediction models and firefighting techniques less effective.”

The central axis of the report was to recommend a federal government power to declare national emergencies, allowing it to mobilise the military for domestic use. Backed by the then Labor opposition, the Morrison government had moved in that direction already. It launched “Operation Bushfire Assist”—a $A87.9 million military operation involving 8,000 troops, including the callout of 2,500 reservists.

The only royal commission recommendation to boost civilian resources was for the establishment of a “national aerial firefighting capability.” That has not happened. NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) commissioner Rob Rogers warned last month that the RFS’s 737 large air tanker was the only Australian-owned large firebombing plane, with other aircraft leased from overseas.

The privately-funded Climate Council, which includes some former firefighting chiefs, issued another warning last month. Its research director, Simon Bradshaw, pointed to the global dimensions of the crisis: “In recent months we’ve seen southern and central Europe, the US, China, North Africa, and Japan all experience extreme heatwaves. India and South Korea have suffered deadly floods. Canada has just experienced its worst wildfire season on record, with scenes eerily reminiscent of Australia’s Black Summer. This is what climate change looks like.”

One of the Climate Council’s members, ex-NSW Fire and Rescue chief Greg Mullins told the ABC the Albanese government had put $200 million a year into disaster preparedness, which was matched by states. He described it as “a drop in the bucket,” adding “that needs a billion-sign after it.”

By contrast, the Albanese Labor government is allocating hundreds of billions of dollars to back the US war moves against Russia and China, while supporting the US-enabled Israeli genocide in Gaza and preparing to hand massive “Stage Three” income tax cuts to the wealthiest layers of society.

As the Socialist Equality Party said in a January 2020 statement, “The Australian fire crisis and the necessity for socialism”: “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 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.”

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site