

Experts say the LA fires are a warning for Australia

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Millions worldwide have been shocked by the fires that have swept through Los Angeles—the second largest city in the US—for more than a week.

Experts warn that the unfolding destruction of the LA fires could be replicated in Australia. In Australia, as in California, governments are engaged in criminal neglect, refusing to adequately prepare for increasingly dangerous fire seasons spurred by global climate change.

The result of the disaster in southern California is still emerging. So far, more than 12,000 buildings have been damaged or destroyed. The official death toll has reached 24, though the real figure is likely far higher.

The fires are not just natural disasters. They have exposed the callous indifference of the ruling class. At every level, governments in the US and California have created the conditions for the fires to spread. This includes slashing tens of millions of dollars from firefighting capabilities and the lack of infrastructure to deal with fires and other disasters.

Similar conditions exist in Australia—a continent known for extreme weather events, including being one of the world's most fire-prone.

Large fires are often considered to be exclusive to regional, rural and wild areas. The LA fires show that increasing extreme weather events are also affecting densely populated areas. In Australia, scientists warn that this could mean cities like Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Canberra and Perth could also see major catastrophic fires.

The greater Los Angeles metropolitan area covers about 87,000km² and is home to about 17 million people. Australia's largest cities—Melbourne and Sydney—both have populations greater than five million and cover areas of roughly 10,000km² and 12,000km².

Sprawling urban and suburban areas mean that more and more working-class families are living in the outskirts of these large cities where grass fires are more likely.

An analysis in the *Conversation* by David Bowman, Professor of Pyrogeography and Fire Science at University of Tasmania, pointed to those dangers.

Bowman wrote: “We don't have Santa Ana winds, of course, but we do have downslope winds (a wind that comes over a topographic barrier like a mountain range). They are often very

dry and warm and can move quickly. There is the possibility for fires to burn into Australian suburbs. It happened in Canberra in 2003. And it could happen again in a major city such as Sydney or Melbourne. We have all the ingredients.”

He added: “If a suburb has older housing stock with older gardens, for instance, it's absolutely ripe for a fire to spread quickly.” The “worst case scenario” was “what we call ‘house-to-house ignition,’ where the houses become the fuel.” There had been minimal to no planning or mitigation to guard against such a scenario.

That the fires in southern California are occurring in the middle of the northern hemisphere's winter means that there is an overlap with the usual fire season in Australia, where firefighting aircraft are often sent from California to help battle blazes in the southern summer.

The LA fires show that the fire season in North America is no longer several months long but is year round. Experts say the same is likely true in Australia as well.

Indeed, Australia has had destructive fires in winter months as well. This includes the last major fire, the Black Summer fires of 2019–2020 which was first reported in northwest New South Wales (NSW) in August—one of the state's coldest months—of 2019.

Black Summer saw 20 million hectares burn, mainly across NSW and Victoria. More than 3,000 homes were destroyed and 33 people died in the fires which were among the worst in Australia's history.

“Fire season used to be quite distinct,” former Fire and Rescue NSW commissioner Greg Mullins said in an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald*. “The North American fire season would finish and ours would start. We'd be able to share things like large aircraft and if we had big fires, we could call them and get specialist firefighters, incident management personnel.”

Australia's national fleet for aerial firefighting includes about 170 aircraft which includes those which are leased from other countries, such as Canada and the US.

Only six aircraft in the fleet are large water-bombing planes. Just one of those—a Boeing 737 with a 19,000-litre capacity—is not leased from overseas.

In September last year, the Labor government of Anthony

Albanese announced the addition of just three helicopters to the national fleet, supposedly to respond to more severe and frequent hazards. The additional aircraft brought the total funding for aerial firefighting in the country to \$48 million.

Attempting to appear concerned for the plight of Australians at risk due to environmental disasters, the Albanese government in 2022 established the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) within months of coming into office.

NEMA acts as an advisory body, rather than an increase in the disaster response capabilities of the Australian government. Through NEMA, the government announced a Disaster Ready Fund (DRF) running over five years from July 2023.

Round one of the DRF ran from 2023–2024 and provided \$200 million. Round two will provide another \$200 million in 2024–2025. Combined, the first two rounds of the DRF wouldn't even be enough to replace the estimated \$432 million of public infrastructure destroyed by the 2022 floods in northern NSW, let alone provide the necessary new utilities required to withstand floods, fires and other disasters.

For comparison, the yearly national budget for defence is \$55.6 billion—nearly 1,200 times greater than the aerial firefighting budget—and is projected to balloon to \$67.46 billion by the 2027–28 financial year.

Between 2023 and 2024, the richest 250 individuals in Australia saw an increase of \$60 billion in their combined wealth.

And where fires and other environmental disasters have caused massive destruction, governments have left workers, middle-class people, small businesses and families to fend for themselves. In the US, the outgoing administration of president Joe Biden has offered a pittance to those affected by the LA fires compared to the \$US150 billion in estimated damages.

Similarly, in Australia, those who lived through the 2019–2020 fires have spoken out against the lack of government action to assist those who were affected and develop necessary infrastructure to prevent future catastrophes.

It is estimated that the fires caused \$2.8 billion of damage to the tourism industry and \$4–5 billion to farmers across Australia. About 7,300 jobs are also believed to have been destroyed, yet the government made just \$276 million in grants available over three years as part of its recovery program which is now closed to applications.

According to a report released in November by the non-profit Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal, five years on from the Black Summer fires \$26 million in funds have been raised for recovery efforts. Of this, only \$2.7 million came from government grants with \$18.6 million coming from individual donors.

In December, the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) interviewed members of communities ravaged by the Black Summer fires.

One resident of Mallacoota, a regional town in Victoria about 420km east of Melbourne, told the SBS that the rebuild

rate—that is the proportion of homes rebuilt five years after the fires—is at just 30 percent. Many said they knew that devastating fires would happen again.

Such events are also on the rise as global warming continues.

NASA and the World Meteorological Organization confirmed this week that 2024 was the hottest year on record globally. In Australia, it was the second hottest year after only 2019.

As global temperatures rise, the tropics are expanding. At the northern and southern edges of the tropics, temperate zones are moving closer to the poles. This means reduced rainfall and higher temperatures for areas like southern Europe, southern Australia, southern Africa and North America. Local vegetation in these regions is becoming drier and more flammable.

Rising temperatures are being spurred on by the continued profit-driven burning of coal, oil and gas which is releasing greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. The scientific expertise exists to transition away from these harmful methods of energy production, but governments around the world continue to approve the expanding operations of oil magnates and mining companies.

The siphoning of wealth into the coffers of the ultra-rich and the military highlights the point made by the Socialist Equality Party (US) in a statement published on Saturday in response to the LA fires:

Workers must reject the claim that there is no money to take these necessary and urgent measures. The vast resources concentrated in the hands of billionaires must be confiscated and redirected toward addressing the needs of those affected by the fires.

Such a struggle requires a struggle by the working class internationally to expropriate the wealth of the billionaires and transform the major corporations into democratically controlled public utilities to be operated for social need, not private profit. Only then can there be the mobilisation of the massive resources required to combat fires and other disasters, rebuild devastated communities, ensure proper infrastructure to deal with extreme weather and other events, and mitigate climate change.



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