

Australia: Koolewong residents speak about recent bushfires

Our reporters
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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with residents of Koolewong and the surrounding area on the New South Wales (NSW) Central Coast, where 16 homes were destroyed and dozens more damaged by bushfires earlier this month, with residents forced to flee with little more than the clothes they were wearing.

The bushfires at Koolewong are among a number of devastating bushfires over the past month. Australia is in the midst of a dangerous bushfire season, with numerous blazes driven by extreme temperatures, strong winds and long-term rainfall deficits.

On December 16, a 34-year-old farmer who had been battling a blaze in Mindarabin in Western Australia (WA) was tragically killed after a fire-damaged tree fell on his vehicle. Another farmer, Mark Mudie, was killed two weeks prior, defending his family's property from fires in Ravensthorpe, also in southern WA.

In Tasmania, some 19 houses were destroyed and 33 more damaged by a bushfire in Dolphin Sands, on the state's east coast, earlier this month. In the mid-north coastal town of Bulahdelah in NSW, four homes were lost and an experienced firefighter, John Lohan, was killed while attempting to control a blaze.

The response of governments has been entirely inadequate. The Tasmanian Liberal government announced a meagre \$250 for adults, \$125 for children and \$1,000 for families experiencing hardship as a result of the fires. The NSW Labor government offered a one-off payment of \$900 to households whose homes were destroyed or severely damaged, and only \$180 for those facing hardship.

Reports have emerged of residents struggling with insurance companies for claims, even to cover emergency accommodation.

Koolewong resident Gordon Plath told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) his insurer, Budget

Direct, had said he would not be covered for emergency accommodation, although he had what he thought was a "comprehensive home and contents insurance policy." In response to inquiries from the ABC, Budget Direct reversed its decision, telling Plath, "We've reviewed it."

The experiences of Koolewong residents highlight a broader pattern of inadequate preparedness and neglect by state and federal governments to so-called "natural" disasters, which are made more frequent and catastrophic as a result of climate change.

A couple who had lived in Koolewong for three years, whose house was one street down from where the fire had reached, told the WSWWS that they had gone to an evacuation centre, but were told there were too many people at the centre to accommodate in hotels and were among a number of residents who offered to stay with family and friends instead.

At the time of speaking to the WSWWS, their house was without power—it had gone off that morning because they were being powered by a generator that was down.

They said that the fire's progression was "very quick, we had never seen anything like it before this close... We were told to evacuate and we didn't have time to pack anything."

The couple reported that they saw the fire and smoke coming over the hill, then they were told to evacuate. There was no way for them to get out other than by crossing a railway line on foot.

A local teacher said, "It's devastating, the only good thing you can say is that no lives were lost."

"My house was potentially going to go up. We made sure we did everything we could, we were putting out spot-fires in the yard. The fire here was happening so quickly. It was dry, the conditions were a perfect storm."

“The fire brigade are awesome, they’re always telling us that bushfire season’s coming and what we can do to prepare, they’re very proactive about that, and the firefighters are excellent, you can’t fault them. They were trying to get in there [to where the houses were destroyed], but there are narrow roads and only one way in...”

“The bush is right on the back of the houses. Some of them were 20 or 40 years old and not made of fireproof materials. They need to rethink how they protect houses, and the greedy insurance companies should be paying for everything. I was watching a documentary on the California wildfires and there was one house that didn’t burn down because it was made from fireproof materials.”

She said that there needed to be more funding from governments for firefighting and fire prevention services. “With climate change, this is getting more and more common and we can sort of predict it... It’s almost like, if we can predict that this is going to happen, why don’t we start preparing for this now?”

Another resident said that he had also battled spot-fires along with his neighbours: “We’ve always been told not to fight the fires but to wait for the professionals to come—we’ve had some training, but not to save houses. The concentration for us was putting out spot-fires, because the fire came over the hill at such a rate that it was impossible for a handful of us to stop it.

“We were very lucky. One of [the neighbouring] houses did catch alight in the gutters; we were lucky to get that out. I ended up having to evacuate a 100-year-old lady and her husband who’s 96 and can’t walk properly—it was a bit of a drama but we did get there. When I got them into the car, I couldn’t get out at first because of police cars—there’s just one road and nowhere to turn around.

“I think the [government’s] organisation, even though it’s under review all the time, seems to lag. In the area I live in, I’ve lived there for 26 years and I think there’s only been one [hazard reduction] backburn in that period of time, and that was only a superficial sort of thing, as far as I’m concerned. I think those things need to be attended to more often.

“There are people around who don’t believe in climate change, but I’m old enough to have seen the change.

“We certainly could do with some help from the council to do something about the road in here and for emergency services to come in. Firefighters had to come a certain way to get here... it should take them about five minutes but the fire was moving so quickly...”

“I was evacuated overnight and my sons and other relatives were fighting the fire while I was gone.

“Most of the houses were old, fishing-cottage type things. Residents couldn’t afford to do much about [housing materials]. And now, there’s going to be problems with insurance companies—they don’t mind taking your money but they don’t like giving it back.”



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