

Australia: Victoria bushfire catastrophe exposes Labor's broken promises and indifference

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Bushfires across the Australian state of Victoria have now burned close to 400,000 hectares of land, destroyed roughly 500 buildings and claimed at least one life, laying bare the criminal indifference of the political establishment to an entirely foreseeable catastrophe.

Authorities report that around a dozen major fires are still burning, with dozens more smaller blazes and hotspots across central and northeastern Victoria days after the worst of a heatwave has passed.

Police on Sunday announced the first confirmed fatality of these bushfires. Max Hobson, a beloved cattle farmer in his 80s, perished while trying to save his herd. The former mechanical engineer and project manager had only recently taken up full-time farming. Hobson's body was discovered roughly 100 metres from his vehicle along a remote dirt road in Gobur, just a 10-minute drive from his home which was destroyed in the ferocious Longwood fire complex.

Hundreds of families from Longwood, Ruffy, Walmer-Ravenswood South, the Castlemaine region and along the Murray River near Walwa have returned to find their homes, sheds and livelihoods reduced to ash. Among the hundreds of structures destroyed are at least 179 homes, according to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), with that figure expected to grow in the coming days as fires continue to burn out of control across the state.

The Longwood complex in central Victoria and the Walwa-Mount Lawson fires on the New South Wales border remain among the largest and most destructive, but at least 10 other significant bushfires are still active, including in the heavily forested and rural-residential areas near Castlemaine and Ravenswood South northwest of state capital Melbourne.

Many residents have also lost their livelihoods, particularly mass livestock losses. The Victorian Farmers Federation estimates more than 15,000 cattle, sheep and horses have perished statewide.

Victorian Premier Jacinta Allan's visits to bushfire-affected areas—such as her trip to Natimuk on Monday, 12 January, alongside Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's appearance in Bendigo on Sunday, 11 January—are cynical, politically motivated photo opportunities designed to deflect from the government's criminal unpreparedness and offer hollow assurances amid the ongoing devastation.??

These were carefully choreographed events where Allan and Albanese—flanked by emergency workers—announced a meagre \$19.5 million "relief package." Apart from the fodder relief, this package includes just \$5 million for a recovery support program, \$2 million for a recovery hotline, \$1.5 million for emergency accommodation and \$1 million for mental health support.

The one-off payments are an insult to families who have lost everything and demonstrate the contempt of the Labor governments and the ruling class they represent for ordinary workers, farmers and other members of the rural and regional communities who have been affected. The combined state and federal governments are providing just \$680 per adult and \$340 per child for families affected by the fires, and up to \$2,380 per family.

Another one-off grant is being offered for some uninsured families of up to \$52,250, presented as generous aid to help find temporary accommodation for families who have lost their homes. This will not come close to replacing even a modest rural home, let alone farm infrastructure, vehicles and lost income.

Residents in bushfire-prone areas face extremely high premiums from billion-dollar insurance companies or refusal of coverage by some insurers which make it practically impossible to obtain insurance for their homes or vital agricultural infrastructure.

In an interview with ABC News Breakfast, Ruffy resident Theo Lagarde said: "Hopefully most people are covered by insurance, some people won't be. But insurance doesn't cover everything. The amount of infrastructure that's under the ground and that's been destroyed like pipes, fittings... the tools you need to get, the basic stuff... it's a lot of money to get going again. None of that's covered by insurance."

Lagarde conducted the interview after having lost his home and all of his possessions while he fought the fires as a Country Fire Authority (CFA) volunteer in nearby Tarcombe.

"We were at the head of the fire and then the wind would change and throw sparks out another way and, by the time the trucks got there, it's already spread again. Just didn't have enough trucks or cars or helicopters," he said.

Despite the obvious and long foreseen dangers of global fire seasons intensified by climate change, successive governments in Australia have refused to provide the necessary resources to prevent such catastrophes.

Fire authorities and scientists had cautioned months ago that spring growth would swiftly evolve into a highly combustible state in January, and that climate change driven heatwaves would produce extreme to catastrophic fire weather across southeastern Australia. Instead of massively expanding professional firefighting capacity and infrastructure, the Victorian Labor government has continued to rely on overstretched volunteer brigades in the CFA, while federal Labor, like its Coalition predecessors, starves disaster preparedness and climate mitigation programs of funds even as hundreds of billions are poured into the military and into subsidies for the fossil fuel and mining giants.?

The CFA, which is responsible for most of the state's country areas, has long warned of aging truck fleets, insufficient full-time staff and an over reliance on volunteers who must somehow balance firefighting with paid work and family responsibilities. Many of these volunteers fought against blazes for long hours while their own properties, homes and livelihoods were destroyed.

During the 2019–20 Black Summer fires, the lack of a coordinated, properly funded national response was starkly exposed: volunteer brigades fought day after day in apocalyptic conditions, while the federal government refused for weeks even to deploy military resources and there was no unified command or national level firefighting air fleet. Those fires burned an estimated 24 million hectares, directly killed 33 people and caused smoke-related illnesses in thousands more.

Nearly six years later, in the face of another “state of disaster” in Victoria, the same basic problems remain.?

Fire services remain fragmented along state lines, with no permanent, federally owned national aerial firefighting fleet—only ad hoc contracts and interstate requests that leave aircraft competing for availability when heatwaves strike multiple states simultaneously. Water bombers can cross borders under negotiated arrangements, but delays and cost-sharing hamper rapid deployment.

Incompatible radios, mapping systems and command structures have further paralysed cooperation across the Victoria–NSW border, while volunteer brigades exhaust themselves shuttling between jurisdictions.

Far from a coordinated government response, working people are leading the relief effort. Communities have already organised fundraisers, feed drives, and shared meals while local businesses provided accommodation. From donating ammunition to bringing jams to exhausted volunteer firefighters, local residents are sustaining each other.

Six years after the 2019–20 Black Summer infernos exposed the complete ineptitude of Australia's disaster response architecture, the Victorian bushfires have shattered the empty promises of reform peddled by the Albanese Labor government and its Liberal National predecessors.

The Albanese government touted a nationally coordinated disaster response through the establishment of the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) in 2022 which was tasked with disaster coordination and risk reduction through the \$200 million annual Disaster Ready Fund (DRF).

So far, the DRF has funded hundreds of projects to the tune of \$600 million, but these have been disconnected state mitigation

projects criticised by a 2025 Australian National Audit Office report as being only “partly appropriate” and their selection “not open or transparent.” These projects have delivered zero additional firefighting capacity.

A unified national service—with professional crews, standardised communications and guaranteed resources—has not been created under a profit system that treats working people's lives as expendable while billions flow to coal barons and the armed forces.

This criminal response flows directly from the subordination of every sphere of life—emergency services, energy policy, infrastructure—to the accumulation of profit by the capitalist class. Commitments to emissions cuts and disaster preparedness dissolve when they collide with the imperatives of banks, mining conglomerates and arms contractors, leaving volunteer firefighters to bear the impossible burden of defending remote communities with aging tankers and no backup.?

The defence of working class and farming communities, alongside the natural environment itself, hinges not on further inquiries or bipartisan handwringing, but on rational, scientific planning and the equitable distribution of society's resources. The escalating frequency of heatwaves, cyclones and droughts demands not only a national but an international emergency response: unified firefighting fleets capable of surging across borders, global research networks to map and mitigate climate tipping points, and the rapid phase out of fossil fuels under workers' democratic control.?

Such a program is incompatible with capitalism, which treats human lives and ecosystems as collateral damage in the drive for private profit. The fight to protect Victoria's fire ravaged districts, Queensland's cyclone threatened coast and every other frontline community requires the independent political mobilisation of the working class to overthrow the profit system and establish socialism—where production is reorganised for need, not private wealth, and international solidarity becomes the basis for humanity's survival in the face of environmental catastrophe.



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