

Bushfires in Victoria highlight government inaction on infrastructure and climate change

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For nearly three weeks, a bushfire has burned through a large area in the western region of Victoria, Australia's second most populous state. The fire has engulfed at least 76,000 hectares of land—roughly the size of Singapore.

While no injuries or deaths have been reported among residents, authorities say three homes have been destroyed in the regional town of Moyston, 220 kilometres northwest of the state capital Melbourne. At least 11 farmers' sheds have also been razed in Moyston and nearby Pomonal. The fire has also claimed hundreds of livestock and local wildlife.

The bushfire was sparked by a lightning strike on December 16 in the popular tourist region, the Grampians National Park. The blaze formed a 384-kilometre-long perimeter within two weeks. It was able to grow with such speed due to the dry and hot conditions brought by an Australia-wide heatwave which saw temperatures across the country reach 30–40°C (86–104°F) for several days.

December also saw an out-of-control fire in the state of Western Australia burn through nearly 2,000 hectares before reducing in severity.

The Grampians fire continues to burn but has been spreading more slowly since Christmas. However, with new heatwaves across Australia in coming weeks, authorities are warning that the fire may spread and that other regions may also be at risk.

Such extreme weather events are becoming more common as the climate dries and temperatures around the world hit record levels due to the continued burning of fossil fuels, which are creating a global greenhouse effect. Globally, 2023 was the hottest year on record. The World Meteorological Organization predicted in November that 2024 would break that record.

According to new statistics from Australia's Bureau

of Meteorology (BOM), 2024 was the second hottest year in the country since records began in 1910. Temperatures last year were 1.46°C above average.

All of Australia's 10 hottest years have occurred since 2005, the BOM data shows. In the past 40 years, only two—1989 and 2000—have been cooler than the long-term average.

The only year in which Australia experienced hotter temperatures than 2024 was 2019. That year was 1.51°C above average. This is particularly ominous given the manner in which that year ended: with some of the worst bushfires in Australia's history.

The 2019–2020 “Black Summer” bushfires burned about 20 million hectares, mainly across New South Wales and Victoria. More than 3,000 homes were destroyed and 33 people died in the fires. An estimated three billion animals also perished.

The inadequate response of state and federal governments during those fires sparked mass outrage. Then Liberal-National Prime Minister Scott Morrison infamously holidayed in Hawaii as a vast swathe of the country burned, and then defended his indifference by declaring that he did not “hold a hose.”

In response to the latest fires, current Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Victorian state Premier Jacinta Allan have sought to avoid a similar backlash, adopting a posture of concern as they visited the fire-affected region just before the end of the year.

During the visit, Albanese declared that the federal government would provide “whatever is required.”

This promise, however, amounted to paltry relief payments for residents. Eligible residents would be granted a one-off payment of \$680 per adult and \$340 per child, capped at \$2,380 per family. This amount is wholly inadequate to cover food, clothing, medication and temporary accommodation for those affected by the

bushfire.

Meanwhile, local volunteers have begun rebuilding efforts, including erecting 500 kilometres of fencing which was destroyed by the fire.

The fire exposes the lack of infrastructure in the Grampians and around the country to deal with blazes. It is the fourth large bushfire in the Grampians since 2006, yet residents have stressed that the government response is concerning.

One worker who lives in the regional town Horsham, about 300 kilometres northwest of Melbourne, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that residents are angry at “the slowness in the response to the fire and the lack of infrastructure directed towards it: firebombing planes, helicopters etc.” not only in the Grampians, but across the state and nationally.

The worker also pointed out that the government has refused to carry out controlled burns to reduce the intensity of fires. This was “a cost cutting exercise by government to the detriment of the small rural communities that have been affected/destroyed,” he stated.

He also said a local farmer, who had experienced earlier bushfires in the region, was turned down by the government when he requested a fire break. “He then took it upon himself to build the firebreak and has subsequently been charged by authorities,” the worker explained.

Five years since the destruction wrought by the Black Summer bushfires, workers and farmers in regional areas have denounced the governments for not carrying out promised rebuilds in affected areas.

Meanwhile, governments in Australia and internationally continue to approve coal and gas projects which experts warn are going to add to the greenhouse gas emissions that are exacerbating the climate crisis behind increasingly severe weather events including bushfires and flash flooding.

In the same week that the bushfire in the Grampians began, the Albanese Labor government announced four coal mine expansions. The decisions are a repudiation of Labor’s supposed commitment to “ambitious action on climate change,” and continue pro-fossil fuel policies it has pursued since the May, 2022 election.

Workers and farmers in regional areas know that the blaze in the Grampians is just a foretaste of the destructive impact of climate change. Thousands of

homes, livelihoods and lives are being put at risk by the policies of governments that are putting the corporate interests of the mining and energy companies ahead of the lives of ordinary people.

A scientifically-based response to the threat of extreme weather events must oppose the capitalist profit system which is the root cause of environmental destruction. The alternative is a fight for the socialist reorganisation of society, under which social need will take priority and resources will be marshalled to deal with the issues confronting a complex mass society.



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