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Australia's fires fueled by capitalist exploitation

written by Scott Scheffer
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Charmaine Sellings, right, leads an all-Indigenous women's firefighting brigade.

There just is no way to describe what is happening in Australia. The fifteen million acres that are engulfed in flames are an area bigger than Switzerland. Even in Sydney, the capital city, air quality has been from 10 to 17 times the level considered hazardous and the skies are intermittently blood red from the glow of nearby fires, and black with dangerous smoke.

Firefighters up and down the eastern coast of this driest continent on Earth report walls of fire 100 meters tall. "Fire tornadoes" have flipped over fire trucks. Persistently rotating updrafts caused by the heat that precedes the arrival of actual

flames have caused supercell storms, the most severe category of thunderstorms.

Dozens of people have died and somewhere between 500 million and 1 billion animals may have perished. Many smaller species will vanish completely. Thousands have evacuated. At one point, four thousand people in Victoria made their way to the relative safety of beaches with fire closing in on them, waiting for rescue.

The perilous situation has hit many First Nation communities even harder because of government neglect. In many cases, only their own efforts have saved lives and homes.

The village of Lake Tyers, in Eastern Victoria, has only a small water tank on a pickup truck. The isolated peninsula is home to 200 residents and has one access road. An all-Indigenous women's firefighting brigade whose members are part of the council of their self-governing community are the firefighting team.

Charmaine Sellings leads the brigade and in an interview with the organization Now to Love said: "Just one crack of lightning on a stormy day could be disastrous. ... We are in extreme conditions. Our dams are empty and it's not a good situation. The crew will work around the clock. We hope for a quiet summer, but we fear the worst."

The Guardian reports that in Ulladulla on the south coast the fires had burned all the way to the sand by early December. Just a few miles north of there is a protected area called Murramarang — the site of archaeological finds that hold "the stories of 12,000 years of Yuin occupation in layers of stone tools, spear points, fish bones and oyster shells," according to an essay published in the Guardian by Lorena Allam, an Indigenous writer. No one knows yet how much of these treasured artifacts will have survived.

The administration of Prime Minister Scott Morrison is packed with energy industry-

friendly, climate deniers – it's been reported that over \$29 billion annually is handed over to fossil fuel companies. Australia is the 4th largest coal producer in the world and the owners of coal and other sectors of the energy industry have government officials in their back pocket. Billionaire Rupert Murdoch's major newspaper, "The Australian," is doing its part by constantly assigning the blame for the fires to arsonists.

Australia is a junior partner of the U.S. and Western European imperialist countries with a large modern military. In 2018, it became the second largest purchaser of military equipment in the world behind Saudi Arabia. But in the early weeks of the crisis, as fires ripped through the country, the military was idle. Only after weeks of raging fire and at least a month left of the fire season—as intense criticism mounted—did Morrison finally call out naval ships to carry out evacuations from southeast coastal villages.

Still the crisis is far from over. When the fires are extinguished and the smoke has cleared in Australia, the billionaire owners of the mines that deplete precious water resources, the agribusiness that burns forests to make way for profitable crops, the right-wing media that downplay climate change, and the bought-and-paid-for politicians will face a reckoning.

