

Snapshots of the ecological crisis in Australasia - The largest fire front in Australia's history

Tuesday 21 January 2020, by [WHITE Ani](#) (Date first published: 19 January 2020).



Dunedin Smoke

NZ's South Island with and without bushfire smoke (pic from Alpine Guides).

New Years' Day 2020, Ōtepoti/Dunedin (Aotearoa/New Zealand)

Ironically, my first real-life encounter with the Australian bushfires – not mediated by Facebook, Twitter, or a press article – is the smoke that drifts to Dunedin, Aotearoa/New Zealand. Ironical because despite being born in NZ, my current place of residence is Victoria, Australia – a region which was only directly affected after my NZ holiday began. NZ is over 3,000 kilometres from Australia – contrary to a common misconception, we are not near to each other – so the smoke reaching Dunedin in NZ's far south is not insignificant.

Although the yellow tint over Dunedin is less severe than habitats and homes destroyed, or deaths, the directness of the experience affects me more. It's the first time the bushfires make me tear up. The concept of climate grief names this experience. Two weeks later, on my return to Melbourne, its air quality is the worst in the world¹, though my flat is out of the path of the fire itself.

Environmentalists often wonder how to convey a crisis that you don't experience directly. Yet now in Australasia and elsewhere, we are beginning to experience the ecological crisis directly. Even with this shift from abstract to concrete, the denial from key players remains, whether conservative denial of the basic facts of anthropogenic global warming, or liberal denial about the scale of changes needed.

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October 28th 2019, Narrm/Melbourne (so-called Australia)

A ragtag collection of socialists, anarchists, indigenous protectors, and liberal environmentalists blockade the International Mining and Resources Conference (IMARC) at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre.

For me, it's all very reminiscent of NZ's weapons conference blockades. In both cases the crowd is narrower than the mass marches, and more militant, yet notably intergenerational. In both cases the tactic is to directly stop industry actors even if only for a day, to take direct action, not just symbolic action. And in both cases, police repression is brutal. Although the tactics are portrayed in the press

as violent, they are fundamentally the tactics of non-violent civil disobedience – putting your body on the line. The weapons conference actions recently led to the cancellation of the conference in NZ, after a number of years moving between venues and cities in a futile attempt to escape protest actions.

My first hour is spent at the front line, the main entrance. Our arms locked together, cops pressing from behind, knees into backs. The horses arrive, always a terrifying moment of intimidation, and we chant ‘get those animals off those horses.’ The first arrest targets Jerome Small, a prominent socialist who is on the megaphone. A number of cops descend on him, knocking him to the pavement, and we cry ‘shame.’

An organiser requests bodies for another entrance. This is part of the difficulty of these blockades – the coordination to cover multiple entrances without spreading yourself too thin. About ten of us head to this smaller entrance. This site is quieter, though cops visit us a couple of times, monitoring us rather than trying to break the picket. We film them and they film us. During that time the police crackdown at the main entrance intensifies, with multiple arrests and at least one limb broken. Unfortunately I miss the participation of my own union, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), despite wearing an NTEU shirt myself.

Later, a photograph of one cop shows him pulling the OK symbol, recently adopted by far right trolls.

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September 20th 2019, Narrm/Melbourne (Australia)

The biggest Climate Strike yet. An estimated 100,000 attend in Melbourne.² More than 3.5% of the population attend the demonstrations in Aotearoa New Zealand. ³

My union endorses the strike. A colleague’s tutorial overlaps with the strike, so it’s cut short. In my classes, the majority of students are engaged with the climate movement, despite being generally uninvolved in party politics.

The NTEU contingent joins the student contingent joins the main march, at state parliament. At that point I move to the pavement to watch, and film, the tens of thousands streaming past, a stream not stopping for well over half an hour. My favourite sign says ‘Aliens will be so disappointed we chose capitalism over existence.’

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August 26th 2019, Narrm/Melbourne Victoria (Australia)

SBS Australia reports the following:

A tree with smoke billowing out of it was discovered just after daybreak on Monday nearby the site of a mass protest demonstration to save sacred Djab Wurrung trees located in Victoria’s western districts.

Traditional Owners who have been camped out in an attempt to stop a controversial upgrade to the state’s Western Highway between Ararat and Buangor said they were left feeling “gutted” by the act of vandalism...

The Western Highway development along a 12.5km stretch of land could potentially see nearly 1000 trees bulldozed.

The suspected attack comes in the wake of a mass gathering at the Djab Wurrung Embassy in the

past week, as supporters of the land and trees brace for an imminent eviction so that construction of the bypass can begin.⁴

The Djab Wurrung Tent Embassy, set up to protect ancestor trees from a highway expansion, is around 2 hours' drive from my flat. I've visited twice, when the organisers sent out Red Alerts concerning potential police encroachment. When the arson at Djab Wurrung is perpetrated, the 2019 Australian bushfire season has not begun, but the Amazon fires are ongoing. Across the world, indigenous people are canaries in the coal mine, standing at the front lines of the fight to protect nature from colonial capitalism.

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Even for those of us with a low opinion of right-wing politicians, the brazenness of Australian PM Scott Morrison's non-reaction to the bushfires is shocking. Although much has been made of his family holiday, surely more significant is the initial refusal to allocate funding to volunteer firefighters. Surely, even for a man who once held a lump of coal up in parliament saying "don't be scared", this is an obvious national emergency. Surely even if you treat this as purely a natural disaster, disconnecting it from the context of increasingly dry land and rising temperatures, it's good optics to at least pretend you take it seriously.

On December 29, months into the crisis, Morrison finally allocates some payments for New South Wales volunteer firefighters. Yet this is restricted to those who are self-employed or work for small or medium-sized businesses.⁵ Unemployed volunteers are still threatened with losing benefits, as they are no longer available for paid work.

The New South Wales bushfire is the largest fire front in Australia's history.⁶ The Australian bushfires are bigger than the Amazon fires or the California fires. And yet they are met with sheer complacency and negligence, bordering on mockery.

Morrison is confirming our worst fears: that much of the ruling class have decided to simply let the world burn, let the poor die, and retreat to their bunkers (a number of them located in the South Island of NZ⁷). Morrison is now very unpopular, but if he loses out as a result of a reshuffle, the Liberals will likely continue his policies. Australia has recently charged through 3 leaders in 4 years, a political Hydra.

Although NZ's Labour government is not quite as overtly atrocious as Australia's, their response is still grossly inadequate. The recent Zero Carbon Act was heralded for achieving bipartisan success. For all the hashing out of various details on paper, the fact that emitters will face no consequences for failing to meet targets makes the whole thing basically toothless. The reality is that reducing emissions means confronting entrenched powers such as NZ's agriculture industry. Bipartisanship and ecological justice cannot be reconciled. We're left with outright denial at worst, and symbolic commitments at best.

I still hold to the position, not new but articulated recently by Extinction Rebellion, that only a mass social movement can force the necessary institutional changes - let alone replace destructive institutions entirely. Yet as the movement grows, institutions remain as yet unchanged, and the world literally burns around us.

Ani White

1. Smoke haze makes Melbourne's air quality world's worst, for a time, The Age
<https://tinyurl.com/ukk3b8z>

2. 'This crisis, it affects everyone': Organisers say 100,000 at Melbourne's climate strike, The Age
<https://tinyurl.com/y2zptemn>
 3. Tens of thousands of New Zealand children kick off new climate strikes, Reuters
<https://tinyurl.com/w3ykfzl>
 4. Ancestor tree on fire in suspected arson attack outside Djab Wurrung embassy, SBS Australia
<https://tinyurl.com/y5zl4v8e>
 5. Scott Morrison announces compensation payments for New South Wales volunteer firefighters, ABC News
<https://tinyurl.com/vkbemue>
 6. NSW Bushfires: Largest fire front in Australia's history, Nine News Australia
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fvUDFCwSF9M>
 7. The Super Rich of Silicon Valley Have a Doomsday Escape Plan, Bloomberg
<https://tinyurl.com/yaa4jzdy>
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P.S.

- Fightback. JANUARY 19, 2020:
<https://fightback.org.nz/2020/01/19/snapshots-of-the-ecological-crisis-in-australasia/>

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