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## **MUA calls for bushfire action; protection of workers from dangerous smoke**

The Maritime Union of Australia is demanding drastic action from the NSW and Federal governments to address the public health emergency caused by bushfire smoke and to rectify the completely inadequate responses to this major health crisis.

MUA Sydney Branch Secretary Paul McAleer said this was a public health emergency that needs to be fixed.

“The bottom line is the people of NSW, and more broadly across the whole country, are faced with a climate crisis driving the largest bushfire season ever and bankrupt conservative governments can’t even buy a plane nor equip the community and firefighters to adequately deal with this inevitability,” he said.

“Politicians have manufactured a climate crisis through ignoring science and failing to resource communities to face the threat. Workers are exposed to the consequences of this failure and must act to defend their health, safety and homes. The MUA Sydney Branch will promote all efforts to protect ourselves against the climate catastrophe that has been thrust into our communities, our workplaces and our lives”.

Even worse, multi-national stevedore DP World has attacked workers, putting wharfies off the payroll because the workforce had to act on its own due to the boss’s lack of consideration and care to the public health crisis facing workers.

MUA Assistant National Secretary Warren Smith said: “For the third day in two weeks, smoke has become so intolerable in Sydney that maritime workers have been forced to stop work. Maritime workers in Newcastle and Port Kembla have also been forced to down tools due to the severe health risks and effects of working in such high levels of smoke.

“We demand action from governments to protect workers and protect the community, and will continue to stand up to employers who want us to work in intolerable conditions.”

Respected doctors and medical organisations have declared a public health emergency, making the lack of action disturbing and of great concern. Organisations including the Royal Australasian College of Physicians, Lung foundation, Asthma Australia and the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine all agree we are in a public health crisis.

MUA Southern NSW Branch Secretary Mich Cross said of Port Kembla: “Operations where our members are involved have been reassessed. The workforce at the stevedoring operations, as always, are working safely and continually monitoring the smoke and heat situation. They will not put themselves or workmates at risk.”

Prime Minister Scott Morrison was warned this would be the worst fire season we have ever faced. In April 2019, a group of former fire chiefs wrote to Prime Minister Scott Morrison to warn him that there was insufficient equipment in Australia to deal with it, and that we should not be relying on volunteers to address natural disasters. They called for immediate funding for large aerial fire tankers, and a recognition that climate change has fundamentally changed the nature of firefighting in Australia. The Prime Minister ignored their advice, and is still refusing to meet with them.

The MUA asks:

- Where is the public health campaign and response?
- Where are the clear instructions to employers about keeping workers safe?
- Why no guidance from Worksafe NSW or Safe Work Australia on managing risks of bushfire smoke at work?
- Why no hourly reporting of PM 2.5 when the government already collects this information? We need to know the facts to make good decisions about when it is safe to work outside, when it is safe to take kids to the park, or let children outside for recess?
- Why is there no clear guidance to schools on what actions to take at different levels of air pollution?
- Why are workers being put off the payroll when conditions outside are hazardous?

The MUA calls on all governments to support our communities by supporting our firefighters and giving them the resources they need immediately.

We also demand that no worker be docked pay due to the climate crisis which has resulted in days of hazardous levels of smoke across NSW.

*MUA SAFETY BULLETIN: Bushfire smoke at work:*

<https://www.mua.org.au/news/mua-safety-bulletin-bushfire-smoke-work>

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