

Mounting anger over Sydney hailstorm disaster

Mike Head
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Nine days after a severe hour-long hailstorm swept across Sydney's eastern suburbs on April 14, more than 3,000 houses still have shattered roofs exposed to the weather. Thousands of residents in Australia's largest city have been told they must wait up to 12 months for repairs that will make their homes habitable. Over the past two days strong winds have torn tarpaulins off their roofs, and rain has again saturated their belongings, repeating the flooding of last week.

Increasingly angry and distressed families have been waiting days on end for assistance. Similar difficulties face the students and teachers of 48 damaged schools and four Technical and Further Education Colleges; the children, staff and parents of numerous child care centres; thousands of workers and small business people whose workplaces have been paralysed; and the staff and users of a number of institutions, including the College of Fine Arts library.

By trade union estimates, 45,000 to 50,000 building workers are currently employed in Sydney, more than ever before, thanks to a temporary construction boom fuelled by projects associated with next year's Olympic Games. They are using advanced machinery that could be utilised for work on roofs and damaged multi-storey home units. But such is the character of the profit system that none of these highly skilled workers and their equipment have been mobilised to aid the victims of the storm. Instead hundreds of volunteers are being used to erect makeshift canvas roof covers and lash them down with sandbags that have been laboriously hand-filled by hundreds more volunteers.

An estimated 20,000 homes and 60,000 cars were badly damaged in the storm. Flying glass and collapsing ceilings seriously injured several people. Hail stones as big as footballs tore through tile roofs, shattered windows and skylights and damaged many cars beyond repair. Worst-affected were the largely working class and immigrant suburbs of Kensington, Kingsford, Randwick, Botany, Alexandria, Rosebery, Marrickville, Sydenham and Miranda.

The ice balls were reportedly the largest to fall in Sydney

since early last century, but the storm was not a "freak" as media reports claimed. Meteorologists have estimated that serious hailstorms hit the city every two or three years. In this case, relatively warm autumn weather sent moist air upwards, where it met cold air, causing larger than normal hailstones.

Yet the storm caught the authorities completely unawares and unprepared, from the Weather Bureau to the State Emergency Services and the Labor Party government of New South Wales. And the days that followed provided one case after another of official disregard for residents and the inadequacy of essential services, combined with profiteering by business operators, large and small.

In the first place, the Weather Bureau gave no warning as the hail swept up the coast from the industrial city of Wollongong, some 80 kilometres to the south. People there experienced the formative stage of the gathering thunder storm as early as 5.30 pm but the forecasting agency issued no alarm, even after the hail began pounding homes in Sydney's south at about 7.30 pm. Asked to explain, a Bureau spokesman said only one meteorologist was on duty after 6.40 pm.

Early warning would not have prevented damage to homes but it would have at least given people time to protect their cars, themselves and possibly household items.

It soon emerged that the largely volunteer body entrusted with coordinating and providing relief services, the State Emergency Services (SES), was hopelessly under-staffed and ill-equipped. Residents whose homes were inundated by ice could not get through to the SES by phone. As of last Wednesday, 2,000 households were still waiting for help. Many of those who were eventually supplied with tarpaulins were told to erect the coverings themselves, despite the dangers associated with crawling across cracked roof tiles to do so.

In many cases, hastily placed tarpaulins or plastic coverings have now been shredded or ripped off by winds. In other cases, the material used is so flimsy or of poor quality that it will not last weeks, not to speak of months.

One typical couple, Andy and Helen Ieroklis of Kensington told reporters that after nine days they had not received any help from emergency services. "The tarpaulins are all ripped and the water is pouring in," Andy said. "I'm just trying to save my furniture. It has been a drama. I kept saying we need to get someone to seal this properly before the southerly change comes or we'll be gone. They were just lifting off like sails."

Other residents told of angry confrontations with SES officials and fire crews, as groups of people demanded canvas to protect their homes.

With an antiquated manual telephone system, the SES could not handle the volume of distress calls. It could not even compile an accurate estimate of the damage, let alone organise timely assistance for all. Its officials, led by a retired Army Major-General, Hori Howard, claimed that emergency repairs would be completed within days. Claiming to act on this advice, for the first week Premier Bob Carr rejected an offer from the federal government to send in military tradesmen. At the same time, Carr asked Canberra to deploy 200 "work for the dole" recipients, who would be forced to undertake the dangerous repair work without pay.

Government officials only began door-knocking late this week to obtain an accurate assessment of house damage. As has been the case in serious bushfires, the local, state and federal governments have relied on volunteer labour rather than call in paid workers, or even their own employees. More than 2,700 volunteers have come from across the state and from other states to assist, but it was not until today that 300 Army personnel arrived--and they will stay for only one week. The Carr government waited just as long to mobilise extra police and ambulance rescue units, as well as National Parks and Wildlife Service workers.

Last Monday Carr announced the establishment of a State Recovery Co-ordination Committee of government and non-government agencies to manage the clean-up. He did not explain why such a body did not already exist, despite a series of major disasters in recent years, including an earthquake in Newcastle in 1989, frequent bushfires around Sydney and across the state, and devastating storm and flood damage in Wollongong last year. On Thursday, the government unexpectedly stripped the SES of overall responsibility for the hail disaster and placed entire suburbs under the command of the Fire Brigade and the Rural Fire Service, another service that utilises volunteers.

The private insurance companies proved no more reliable. They originally estimated the insured property damage at \$340 million, then lifted the total virtually every day as more devastated householders finally had a chance to lodge claims. By yesterday, the bill had risen to \$1 billion--with at

least another \$200 million in uninsured damage. This made the storm the third most expensive disaster in Australian history, after the 1989 Newcastle earthquake and Cyclone Tracy in Darwin in 1974.

Naturally, the insurance companies were primarily concerned about their profits. Even those home and car owners who are fully insured have no guarantee that will be adequately compensated for their losses. Vehicle owners face "excess" payments of around \$800, depending on their insurance policies, and not all companies are waiving the loss of "no claims" bonuses, so that insurance premiums will rise for many people making claims.

The anarchic workings of the market were also quickly on display in the construction industry. While hundreds of qualified roof tilers were kept working to meet deadlines on Olympic or other projects, companies were quoting householders \$14,000 or more for roof repairs that ordinarily cost \$3,000. Others were charging \$1,000 to instal tarpaulins. With 13,000 homes having suffered loss of electricity or other electrical problems, including dangerous short-circuiting produced by flooding, electrical contractors were charging premium prices.

After the first day, the government and the media began a crusade against profiteers and unlicensed contractors but such over-charging flows inherently from the private profit system. In fact, the *Sydney Morning Herald* initially welcomed the boost that it said the storm would provide to the local building industry. It reported enthusiastically that one roofing contractor had "picked up \$3 million worth of business before 9 am" on the day after the storm. An editorial of April 17 declared that the disaster had a "silver lining". It said, "the damage in a sense constitutes an act of divine Keynesianism for many small businesspeople and the people they do--or now will--employ".

Like the Carr government, the newspaper this week tried to adjust its public line, expressing anguish at the prolonged social toll. But the inescapable conclusion is that a combination of government cost-cutting, the running down of public services and private profit-making has vastly multiplied the damage and pain caused by nature.



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