

Sydney hail storm victims face months of misery

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Storms, hail and gale-force winds have returned to Sydney over the past week, bringing new misery to thousands of residents whose homes were devastated by a severe hail storm on April 14. Temporary tarpaulins thrown over wrecked roofs have ripped or lifted off in the winds, exposing already waterlogged ceilings, furniture and carpets to more rain.

Volunteer emergency crews have had to return to houses repeatedly in high winds, trying to lash down tarpaulins and secure them with hand-filled sandbags. In the meantime, residents are waiting interminably for insurance assessors to arrive to approve repair work. They face delays of up to 18 months before their tiled roofs are rebuilt. Entire suburbs are now a patchwork of canvas and semi-canvas roofs--made up by 150,000 tarpaulins.

These scenes have highlighted the makeshift nature of the assistance provided by the state Labor government of Premier Bob Carr. The State Emergency Services (SES) director of operations Dieter Gescke admitted last week that poor quality tarpaulins had been used on many roofs. In any case, even with the best of canvas material, the tarps could not last for many months. Gescke said half the homes would need "consolidation work".

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to residents in the suburbs of Botany and Kensington about their experiences following the initial hailstorm, which damaged an estimated 28,000 homes and 60,000 cars in Sydney's east.

People described large hailstones crashing through windows and roofs, ceilings billowing with water and eventually collapsing, water pouring through light fittings. They said no one could have predicted the severity of the storm. Hail of that size had not been seen since early last century.

Yet their stories also shed light on the government's complete lack of preparation for such major disasters, either to deal with the immediate problems or the longer-term task of repairing the damage. People were largely left to their own devices as they tried to cope with rain, roaring winds, dangerous electricity problems and structural damage.

The authorities were not even able to make an accurate assessment of the magnitude of what had happened. The SES chief, Major-General Hori Howard, initially said he expected emergency repairs to be completed within days. In Botany,

Department of Community Services officers were still going from house to house to see if anyone needed help, 10 days after the storm.

Responsibility for dealing with the disaster was later largely handed over to the Fire Brigade and the Rural Fire Service. Thousands more volunteers were called in to assist. However, according to some of the volunteers (the volunteers were told not to speak to the media), the necessary materials were not immediately available.

Twelve days after the storm, Rural Fire Services Commissioner Phil Koperberg said: "The whole program's well and truly on target." However, he admitted that as many as 5 percent of damaged houses--in other words, 1,000 homes--may still not be covered by the end of the day. And that figure did not include the hundreds of multiple-storey and high-rise dwellings still waiting to be patched up.

Residents who could immediately afford to pay tens of thousands of dollars for tradesmen and tiles had a considerable advantage over those relying on insurance and those uninsured. However, people were being quoted hugely inflated prices for repairs to their roofs.

Most residents were full of praise for the volunteers, but some expressed concerns that the entire emergency operation depended so heavily upon unpaid workers.

John Ellis of Botany said: "The SES came the day after the storm and checked out what they could do. I wasn't too badly hurt because my roof's 12 months old. I think the SES worked to full capacity. The volunteers have been working until 11 o'clock every night--you can't expect human beings to do any more than that.

"But the troops should have been called in earlier because they could have done all the labouring work. The guys from the SES could have put the tarps on the roof if they had the guys from the army lifting them up. The SES volunteers were lifting up the tarpaulins and then going up the ladders to work on them. That is ridiculous when you have 200,000 politicians sitting around on their backsides doing nothing, spending \$1,700 on a chair so that they can sit in comfort, while these guys are working for nothing. It's costing the volunteers their livelihoods and even their businesses."

James Horrey, also of Botany, said his house suffered

relatively minor damage--there were six or seven big holes in the roof and only 40 tiles had to be replaced. "The hailstones were the size of tennis balls around here. We had the SES out the same night. They put the tarp up two doors down and they gave me a hand with ours. They gave me the plastic but I was doing it myself.

"A lady I work with lives in Rosebery and they've lost the roof. When they turn the power on, they can hear cracking through the house. They had to turn it on just to cook their meals. That's the sort of thing where you need people out there quickly and that has been a problem."

Charlie and Margaret Azzopardi are a retired immigrant couple. Charlie had just finished painting the ceilings of the house, all of which are now severely damaged. The windows on the front and one side of the house were shattered. A hailstone had broken the ceramic washbasin in the bathroom after it had smashed through the ceiling. The couple was in the process of obtaining repair quotes.

Margaret said: "I called the ceiling man and he said these kinds of ceilings cannot be fixed. They have to be taken out. They're quoting \$7,000. We're insured for the building but not the furniture."

When we asked who erected their tarpaulins, Charlie replied: "My son-in-law and my son. I couldn't do it." Margaret added: "The people from SES came the day before yesterday and put bags on the roof. I had not seen them before. Now we are afraid that the rain will come in. I think the tarpaulins are getting holes now. We are worried about the ceilings collapsing.

"If the army was here straightaway I think we would be much better off. We've already spent a few hundred dollars. I hope GIO (an insurance company) will pay all that. It costs \$100 a tarpaulin."

Virginia and Glenn Bridger, who live in the same street as the Azzopardis, related their experiences.

Virginia said: "We have about 100 broken tiles on the roof and a lot of cracked ones as well. The ceilings are all waterlogged and there's pretty much nothing left on the roof of our garage. The fire brigade came round on the night of the storm. We have not actually seen the SES. My husband and my dad put the tarp up themselves.

"We started ringing the next day and got a local contractor to come. We rang about 25 contractors. Most of them were taking no calls anymore or would take your number and ring back if they had a chance. I've heard about a lot of people not covered by insurance. I would say that a lot of elderly people are in a bad position."

Glenn added: "We did not see the SES in this street until a week and a day after the storm. By the afternoon after the storm a lot of people here had tarps up on the roof and bits of plastic over the broken tiles. People did it themselves. The elderly people who can't get up on roofs have really suffered."

One Kensington resident said: "I phoned the SES the day after the storm but had no response, just an engaged signal each

time. I was ringing them every day. I suppose they couldn't attend everyone, we can understand that. There are volunteers trying to do their best. It took me to the fourth day to get through.

"Our ceilings have caved in, and the furniture has gone. We tried to make holes to save the ceilings, but we couldn't. After about three hours of the storm the roof just fell down. My boys went up with my husband but they couldn't do a good enough job. The tarpaulin has fallen off and I have asked the volunteers to come out on a number of occasions, which they did.

"I was speaking to a few volunteers and they were worried that they might lose their jobs. It's very unfair--they're helping the community, they're helping Australia."

The state Labor government has provided few paid staff, relying on unpaid volunteers instead. Of the 3,000 people in the emergency effort last week, nearly 2,000 were SES or Rural Fire Services volunteers. Prisoners and young people on work-for-the-dole programs were also required to work for nothing. Premier Carr has appealed to employers to pay the wages of their employees who have volunteered to help with the disaster but most volunteers have had to take unpaid leave.

The state government has donated just \$50,000 to the relief fund, apart from paying benefits to some victims under existing government welfare and housing schemes. It also claims to have spent a relatively small amount--\$25 million-- on emergency work. When Carr was asked why the government had provided so little financial assistance, he replied that the government did not want to encourage people to "under-insure". In other words, government aid should not allow people to reduce their private insurance premiums. Or, to put it bluntly, nothing must interfere with the right of the insurance companies to make money from such disasters.



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