

Australian floods crisis continues

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Australia's floods crisis, which commenced in mid-November, is far from over. Widespread inundation is still occurring across the north-west and west of the southern state of Victoria. Further north, floodwaters from Queensland are heading downstream to threaten towns and farms in southern Queensland and northern New South Wales.

More torrential rains, of the kind that have deluged parts of Queensland, NSW, Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia in recent weeks, are possible over the next few months because of the prevailing La Niña weather pattern. So far, 33 deaths have been attributed to the flooding and nine people are still missing in the Lockyer Valley—just west of Brisbane, the Queensland capital—where homes, vehicles and their occupants were swept away in flash flooding.

Altogether, about three million people have been directly affected. Many face months, if not years, of hardship. In Queensland alone, the floods are estimated to have damaged 28,000 homes and businesses. About 60 percent are thought to lack insurance coverage—they are either uninsured or the insurance companies are refusing to provide flood coverage, or the insurers are insisting that their properties are not covered by standard flood clauses.

Residents of a string of towns and small farming communities in Victoria's north-west were told to evacuate their homes yesterday as flood defences failed in the face of waters flowing toward the Murray River, the continent's largest river. The floods there now take the form of a vast inland sea about 90 kilometres long, affecting an area as large as Denmark. Levee banks were protecting two larger towns, Kerang and Swan Hill, but earthworks holding back waters have collapsed in some other areas. "The levees are failing. Water is entering the area now. The area will be inundated in the next 12 hours," Victoria's State Emergency Service (SES) said in a flood bulletin issued to residents of Murrabit West early yesterday.

The SES said yesterday that 76 towns in Victoria had been affected by flooding, with 1,770 properties suffering

some water damage. Another five to 10 towns are still in the floodwaters' northern path across flat farming country. Kerang, with nearly 4,000 residents, has been cut off by floodwaters for almost a week, and some communities have been warned they may face even longer periods of isolation.

In Queensland, where most of the flooding has now subsided, the plight of the uninsured was highlighted when state Premier Anna Bligh flatly rejected criticism of her government's decision to stringently means-test financial aid for flood-affected families. While claiming to be helping the "neediest", the Labor government has set an income limit that excludes many working people.

Many residents have been denied relief payments after an initial \$4,000 from the federal Centrelink agency, the state government and the Premier's Disaster Relief Appeal. For example, a \$5,000 grant to help uninsured home owners to restore essential utilities is being denied to couples with a combined annual income of more than \$48,400 and to singles who earn more than \$36,600. These limits are well below the average full-time adult ordinary earnings of \$64,641.

The inadequate aid amounts, and the low cut-off points are another early indication of the determination of the state government and the federal Labor government to impose the burden of the disaster on ordinary working people. Prime Minister Julia Gillard and her deputy, Treasurer Wayne Swan, have canvassed imposing a flood levy, as well as spending cuts, to pay for the cost of repairing properties and infrastructure—a bill that the ANZ Bank has calculated could run to \$20 billion (\$US19.8 billion). Gillard and Swan are due to announce their proposals later this week, but Swan has already warned that the floods would have a "dramatic impact" on the budget, which the Gillard government has pledged to return to surplus by 2012-13.

Yesterday, Swan chaired a meeting in Brisbane of the federal government's newly-appointed floods taskforce. Its 10 members feature big business, banking and construction company representatives, including the heads

of the Business Council of Australia, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Australian Industry Group. Others include trucking magnate Lindsay Fox, Woolworths supermarkets chief executive Michael Luscombe, Leighton Holdings constructions chief executive David Stewart and Macquarie Bank director Catherine Livingstone. This line-up suggests that reconstruction projects will be dominated by the same corporate interests that bear major responsibility for the lack of proper planning and infrastructure that magnified the scale of the disaster.

While the rains have been exceptionally heavy, that does not explain the ferocity of the flash flooding that caused most of the deaths, or the magnitude of the damage in Brisbane. In numerous areas, ill-planned urban growth, driven by profit-hungry developers, banks and construction giants has turned vegetated bushland into concrete-dominated suburbs, ensuring high rainfall run-off rates.

In Toowoomba, for example, a city of about 130,000 people some 130 kilometres west of Brisbane, much of the flooding that swept through its streets has been attributed to real estate and business development that had transformed the two creeks which flow through the city into narrow concrete channels.

Over the past week, the *Australian* and other Murdoch newspapers have focussed on one issue: the flood water releases by the operators of the Wivenhoe Dam, which was built after the last major inundation in 1974 to supposedly flood-proof Brisbane. Citing hydrology and engineering experts, the *Australian* has reported that more than 80 percent of the flood in the Brisbane River at its peak on January 13 was the result of the sudden release from Wivenhoe Dam of up to 30 percent of its capacity. The dam's operator, the government-controlled South East Queensland Water Corporation (SEQW), has insisted that all releases were made according to the dam's flood mitigation manual.

While operating procedures may have been a factor, the dam itself is inadequate. Previously, it was reported that state authorities buried a joint SEQW and water department report in 2007 calling for Wivenhoe's capacity to be increased to meet national standards that cover "probable maximum floods". According to the 2007 report, "stage 2 works" to bring Wivenhoe up to "acceptable flood capacity" were not due to be completed until 2035, thus leaving many of Brisbane's 2.2 million residents in danger.

Scientists and engineers have warned the Queensland

government and the Brisbane City Council over the past decade that major flood destruction would occur, especially in newly-built areas, unless authorities took serious remedial action (see: "Reports warned of flood dangers to Brisbane").

Queensland Premier Bligh last week announced a judicial inquiry into the floods disaster across that state, vowing not to "sweep anything under the carpet". She said the inquiry, to be headed by a sitting state Supreme Court judge Cate Holmes, would have the powers of a royal commission, including the ability to summon witnesses, require documents to be produced, and issue search warrants.

Royal commissions, however, are traditional vehicles for giving governments a political breathing space. Those demanding answers are told that they must prepare formal submissions and await the outcome. Two years ago, the Brumby state Labor government in Victoria adopted the same mechanism following Australia's last great catastrophe—the February 2009 bushfires that killed 173 people and destroyed more than 2,100 homes. Finally released last August, the royal commission's report was a political whitewash that failed to probe the economic imperatives behind the budget-cutting policies that contributed to the high death toll (see: "Australian bushfire royal commission report—a political whitewash").

Once again, the Labor leaders and the media are seeking to divert attention away from the systemic factors that have magnified the disaster—such as the cutting back of flood mitigation programs, the under-funding of civil emergency services, the commercialisation or privatisation of basic infrastructure such as water supply, roads and railways, and profit-driven development in catchment areas.



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