

“The powers-that-be left us for dead”

Australia: Grantham flood survivor threatened with arrest

Richard Phillips
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Queensland police threatened Grantham service station owner Martin Warburton, 41, with arrest on Thursday if he attempted to speak with Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Queensland Premier Anna Bligh about the failure of their governments to provide timely and adequate assistance to the flood-ravage community. Warburton, who is chairman of the Grantham relief committee and a former councillor, was told by the local police sergeant he could be arrested and charged for “inciting fear and anger in the community”.

The threat was issued a day before Gillard and Bligh were scheduled to visit a local evacuation centre and followed warnings to the media by Queensland Flood Recovery Taskforce head, Major-General Mick Slater, that any reportage of community “divisiveness” would hamper the “success” of the recovery operation. These developments further highlight the political reality that the principal concerns of the Flood Recovery Taskforce is not the plight of ordinary people but protecting the state and federal governments and corporate interests.

Grantham, a small town of 370 people in the Lockyer Valley about 100 kilometres west of Brisbane, is regarded as the “epicentre” of flash-flooding that hit Toowoomba and Lockyer Valley communities in south-east Queensland.

The town was devastated by a massive wall of water that swept through the town on January 10, destroying all in its path—houses, cars and small businesses. More than 30 people have been killed in the Queensland floods. Eighteen of those are from the Lockyer Valley and Toowoomba areas, with 10 people still listed as missing, feared dead. Residents were given no official warnings of the impending disaster but fought

heroically to save those caught in the raging torrent.

Martin Warburton spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* yesterday about the police threat and the physical and psychological impact of the flood on the small community. He said Grantham residents were outraged by lack of flood warnings, inadequate support and lack of night-time security in the town following the disaster.

Martin Warburton: I spent a whole day in Gatton [a nearby town] trying to get answers or an ear that would listen to our concerns after the flood wiped us off the map. Admittedly I wasn’t dressed for the occasion—I had my old clothes on and was ready to go back home and begin cleaning up—but a mongrel dog in a pound would have been treated better. By sundown that afternoon I realised I wasn’t getting anywhere.

We’d been locked out of the town, which is now classified as a crime scene, and told there had to be a complete search and recovery through the whole area. We agreed with that but wanted our town secured at night.

People in Grantham have been through the worst experience of their life and the last thing they should be worrying about is whether their possessions would be there when they returned. I’d guarantee if this happened in Anna Bligh’s or the prime minister’s neighbourhoods there’d be round the clock security.

But it didn’t matter what we said they wouldn’t listen and the authorities kept falsely accusing us of wanting people taken off search and rescue. I finally reached the mayor and we went to the media. I told the press we’d been diplomatic but we were getting nowhere and they should listen to what we had to say about the lack of support from our governments.

Prime Minister Gillard and Anna Bligh were coming out here on Friday but instead of being able to raise these issues I was told in no uncertain terms by the local police sergeant that if I approached either of them, or made a scene in front of the media, I'd taken away and charged with inciting fear and anger in the community. I have witnesses—the local mayor Steve Jones heard it.

Richard Phillips: What was your reaction?

MW: I was shocked and tried explaining the situation to the local sergeant. You'd think there'd be a bit of compassion or sensitivity, but he wasn't interested. I don't know whether he was being directed or where his orders came from but he made it quite clear that they—the politicians—didn't want any bad press.

In the last few days things have changed and the government and private individuals have started to give us some real assistance, which we really appreciate. But why did it take five days, including two days of smacking our heads up against the wall, before someone started to listen to us. None of this would have happened if we hadn't raised our voices.

I can understand some things take time but why so long? There are children that saw their own family members and neighbours die. Why did the government wait five days to get counsellors to those kids? It's wrong. And the evacuation centres in this area—they were set up by ordinary people, not the government. Without this community spirit we would have had nothing.

RP: Could anything have been done to prevent the flash-flooding?

WM: I don't think so, but we should have been alerted. The Toowoomba flooding happened an hour before it hit us and yet we weren't warned. Why not, don't the powers that be know that water flows down hill?

I started getting phone calls from friends and relatives about the wall of water and to get out of town. They told me about water levels at bridges that didn't seem possible but I knew they wouldn't lie to me and so I had time to run down the street telling people to get out.

The wall of water didn't come along the creek but rushed down the main road and it was at least six metres high. If we'd been warned much earlier the death toll wouldn't have been anywhere near as bad as

it is.

RP: Has there been any discussion about rebuilding?

MW: We don't know where we are with that yet because some people don't even know whether their homes are still standing, and some say they won't be coming back.

Our concerns were not directed against the foot soldiers on the ground or the two police officers at each end of the town but against those higher up, the bureaucrats and powers-that-be who left us for dead.

We're determined to get our community back on its feet again, but why did it take two days of us banging our heads against the wall and being threatened with arrest by the authorities for things to finally start happen?

RP: And the psychological impact of the disaster?

MW: This has scarred me for life. There's no doubt in my mind that once things settle down I'm going to need an awful lot of help to deal with the things I've seen. I'm not blowing wind up my own skirt but I'm a pretty tough sort of fellow and this is something I'll never forget. Hopefully I'll learn to manage these issues.

I know people living on the hill in Grantham who are going to need counselling and other assistance. Their homes weren't directly affected by the water but they saw all the devastation unfold. Many of them were on the railway bridge trying to save people from the roofs of their cars and then unfortunately saw them being swept away, never to be seen again.

Martin Warburton appealed for assistance and support for his town. He can be phoned on 0409486334 or emailed at marnellfuels@westnet.com.au.



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