

Australia: Working people severely hit by Brisbane floods

On-the-spot report from Queensland

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Despite government and media claims that things are “returning to normal”, life remains a nightmare for tens of thousands of working people in suburbs inundated by the severe flooding that hit Brisbane, the state capital, and much of Queensland last month.

When the Brisbane River peaked at 4.46 metres on January 13, 14,972 homes and businesses were completely submerged and 18,025 partially flooded.

Evidence of the destructive capacity of the deluge is everywhere. Large areas, especially those in poorer, working class districts, continue to resemble bomb sites. In some districts, street after street was engulfed, with many homes rendered completely uninhabitable by the raging torrents that severely damaged properties, gutted interiors, and left behind tonnes of debris and mud.

More than two weeks after the floods, hundreds are still displaced, mostly living with relatives or friends, often in cramped and overcrowded conditions, or in rented accommodation they can ill afford. Many of those affected will not recover financially, unable to repair homes that in many cases are empty shells lacking even the most basic services, including electricity and sewage.

Repairs and reconstruction in many suburbs are being hampered by the refusal of insurance companies to pay for flood damage, along with totally inadequate financial assistance from the federal and state governments.

Apart from an initial \$4,000 from the federal Centrelink agency and other small amounts from the state government and the Premier’s Disaster Relief Appeal, many residents have not received any assistance.

Grants of \$5,000 to assist uninsured home owners to restore essential utilities are denied to couples with a combined annual income of more than \$48,400 and to singles who earn more than \$36,600. The average full-time adult wage in Australia is currently around \$64,000!

So severe were the floods that 121 out of 333 pumping stations and 9 out of 28 water treatment plants were damaged, causing raw sewage to flow into the Brisbane River. Tonnes of industrial waste and toxic materials, including significant amounts of magnesium and calcium from industries situated along the river and on flood plains, added to the contamination.

Thousands of ordinary people have lost everything. In the wake of the disaster, 110,000 tonnes of rotting furniture, food and debris have been dumped in Brisbane City council landfills over the past two weeks—the equivalent of one-third of the total waste removed in Brisbane each year.

Brisbane Lord Mayor Campbell Newman announced this week that the city council had granted an extra 30 days to pay rates and allocated a \$100 rebate towards paying water bills for flood-affected residents. This token gesture, like the pittance allocated by federal and state governments, will do little to assist the thousands

of people in devastated suburbs along the Brisbane and Bremer Rivers.

Those living in poorer suburbs are among the hardest hit and, for the most part, have been left to their own devices to rebuild their shattered lives.

One such Brisbane suburb is Goodna, 20 kilometres from the Brisbane CBD, where most of its 2,647 dwellings were affected by the floods, and around 600 homes completely inundated. Goodna is under the jurisdiction of the Ipswich City Council, where a total of 12,000 homes were flood affected.

Like others in the Brisbane-Ipswich area, many Goodna residents purchased properties after being reassured by local authorities and developers that the completion of the Wivenhoe Dam in 1984 had “flood-proofed” Brisbane, ruling out any recurrence of the devastating 1974 floods.

Other residents have been forced by economic circumstances and sky-rocketing house prices over the last decade to purchase homes in the suburb. The median price in Goodna is \$295,000, compared to the median of \$445,000 for the region.

Many residents are employed in manufacturing, distribution, retail or other service industries and earn a weekly income of between \$400 and \$599.

Prior to last month’s disaster, the Giles Caravan Village in Goodna was home to 100 permanent residents, mostly low-paid and unemployed workers, as well as old-age and disability pensioners. Two weeks after the floods tore through the suburb, the park resembles a bomb site.

The force of the deluge, which contained all manner of lethal debris, ripped caravans from their blocks depositing many over 50 metres away. While no one was killed, caravans were completely swamped and then piled on top of one another. Many were ripped apart and smashed beyond repair.

At the peak of the floods, water covered an 8-metre high light pole in the caravan park, which is located on

low-lying land next to the motorway. The site was submerged in the 1974 flood and two lives were lost. According to the site owner, who wanted to remain anonymous, none of the residents had insurance.

Two nearby petrol stations were also completely submerged and fuel from the underground tank leaked into the flood waters, further contaminating waterways and creating additional hazards for people evacuating the area and those involved in rescue efforts. A nearby park provided a graphic indication of the flood height, with a park bench suspended on a tree branch high above the ground.

Goodna’s small businesses were also devastated. St Ives, the suburb’s main shopping centre, was flooded by almost two metres of water, and shops still remain. Residents told the *World Socialist Web Site* that many small shop owners had been ruined and might not be in a position to reopen their businesses. Only 3 of around 25 businesses in the complex had insurance policies covering river flooding.

As is the case throughout the state, the impact of the floods in Goodna and other inundated areas of Brisbane is the outcome of government decisions—state and federal, Labor and Liberal alike—driven by the short term-profit requirements of property developers and other big business interests. Since the record 1974 floods, tens of thousands of homes have been allowed to be built in flood prone areas.



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