

New Zealand: Growing anger over inadequate earthquake relief

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More than two weeks after the New Zealand city of Christchurch was devastated by a 6.3 magnitude earthquake, thousands of people remain in a desperate situation.

The death toll from the quake stands at 166, but the final toll is expected to exceed 200 as more bodies are recovered from the central city and suburbs. On Sunday, officials announced that recovery efforts at the Canterbury Television (CTV) building had ended, with no more bodies found. More than 100 people are believed to have died when the building collapsed.

About 70,000 people—a fifth of Christchurch’s 360,000 residents—have fled to other parts of the country. Many neighbourhoods, particularly in the badly damaged and largely impoverished eastern suburbs, are completely unliveable, without power, running water or sewage. According to current estimates, about 10,000 homes will probably be demolished and 100,000 will need repairs.

Thousands of people in the eastern suburbs—including vulnerable groups such as the elderly and disabled—are living in seriously damaged houses or makeshift accommodation such as garages, tents and caravans. A magnitude 4.8 aftershock last Saturday night—the biggest to hit the city since the quake—has added to the disaster, whilst heavy rain over the weekend caused flooding in some streets, made worse by drains which were already blocked with silt and sewage from the quake.

On dry and windy days last week many suburbs were covered in clouds of silt dust, which is laden with sewage and which, according to one news report, “sticks in the eyes and coats the mouth and nostrils”. Most of the city’s rivers and streams are contaminated, and residents are being told to boil drinking water—although this is

impossible for those without power. The Canterbury District Health Board has warned that the contamination could lead to outbreaks of gastroenteritis.

While the National Party government of Prime Minister John Key claims that everything possible is being done to help those in need, anger is mounting over the grossly inadequate relief efforts. At community forums held in the eastern suburbs last Sunday, residents asked why portable toilets and other essential services were not being provided to the poorest and most damaged parts of the city.

The *New Zealand Herald* reported that one resident told Civil Defence director John Hamilton that “there were 70 people in their area over 75 who did not have access to a toilet”. Hamilton later admitted that Civil Defence had “grossly under-appreciated the scale of the damage in suburban areas. The scale of the operation is so big it is a challenge to provide these services for so many people.”

Kevin Guy, from the badly-affected suburb of Bexley, told the *Star Canterbury* that residents were “pissed off and depressed” over the lack of toilets and adequate housing. Another man told TVNZ that “the feeling in our area [is] that if you’re not in the rich houses, we don’t count”. (See: “Christchurch residents denounce lack of basic services”)

Last Friday, Prime Minister Key was confronted by residents while visiting a damaged power substation in Bexley. Tracey Bolton, a mother with three children, including one suffering from diabetes, asked why no toilets had been provided for her street. Another woman said there were elderly residents who had “no storage; their stuff’s sitting in a sewer because they’ve got nowhere to put it. And they just want to move on, they

want to be paid out.”

Key responded with barely disguised contempt, telling the gathered media: “In a perfect world we’d click our fingers and there would be tens of thousands of portaloos and all of the things that we want. But we don’t live in the perfect world.”

While he insisted that Civil Defence had done everything it could, little assistance has been provided to those whose homes are uninhabitable. The vast majority of those made homeless have been left to fend for themselves or to rely on family, friends and charity. Only one overnight welfare centre remains open at Pioneer Stadium, accommodating around 100 people.

Housing Minister Phil Heatley told Radio New Zealand that the government’s “expectation is that people will find their own way in terms of temporary accommodation—we’ll simply step into the breach where people are unable to do that”.

More than 3,000 people have so far lost their jobs as a result of the quake. They will receive the measly sum of \$NZ400 (\$US295) a week—less than the minimum wage—for six weeks, before being put onto the unemployment benefit, which is less than \$200 a week. A further 34,400 people are being forced to survive on subsidies of \$500 a week, which are being provided to local employers who choose to keep staff on. The government estimates that 9,000 people in the region will lose their jobs over the next three months—pushing the national unemployment rate above 7 percent.

According to the Treasury, the cost of rebuilding will reach \$15 billion, including damage to houses, commercial property and infrastructure, and will take more than four years to complete. The government expects to lose up to \$5 billion in tax revenue over five years. The economy, which had already begun to contract by the end of 2010, is almost certain to slide into recession for the second time since the onset of the global financial crisis in 2008.

The entire political establishment, backed by the corporate media, agrees that the working class must be made to bear the vast bulk of this cost. The only debate is over how this should be done. Prime Minister Key has made clear that the government’s May budget will

include “deep” spending cuts, including to the Working for Families scheme, which provides tax credits for working parents.

These cuts will come on top of the austerity measures already implemented by the government. These include making it easier for employers to fire workers, restricting access to welfare payments, freezing wages across the public sector and increasing the regressive Goods and Services Tax (GST).

While Phil Goff, leader of the main opposition Labour Party, told Radio New Zealand last week that cuts to Working for Families would be “absolutely wrong,” he agreed that the government had to make spending cuts in order to rebuild Christchurch.

Green Party co-leader Russel Norman similarly told Radio NZ it was “fair enough for the government to look at what areas it can cut spending, provided that those cuts don’t affect some of those people in our community who really do need support. We are in a very serious situation and we can’t afford to go more into debt to pay for the rebuild.”

The Greens have called for a levy on incomes over \$48,000, which would have a dramatic impact on working class families already struggling to cope with the soaring cost of living.

Almost the entire expected cost of the Christchurch quake could be met by the six wealthiest New Zealanders, who were named in last year’s National Business Review “Rich List.” They control a total of \$14.5 billion.



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