

Australia: Anger mounts as Labor governments abandon Queensland flood survivors

Richard Phillips
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When floods hit Queensland last December and January, taking the lives of 34 residents and affecting 80 percent of the state, including the capital Brisbane where 20,000 homes were inundated, the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard and the Queensland state government feigned concern and promised survivors emergency relief.

Months later, thousands of families—many still living in caravans, motels, tents and other makeshift accommodation—face an increasingly desperate situation, their appeals to government authorities for adequate assistance to help restore their lives falling on deaf ears.

Those attempting to secure insurance payouts and begin repairing their homes, moreover, continue to be stonewalled or denied their claims. Most insurance policies, for example, do not cover damage caused by riverine or inland floods.

Currently more than a third of those lodging legal appeals against their insurers for refusing to pay up are from the outer-Brisbane suburb of Ipswich. In nearby Goodna, only 1 in 20 residents whose properties were severely flooded have been able to begin reconstruction as other claims have been denied or delayed. Thousands more throughout Queensland who could not afford flood insurance—up to five times the cost of normal house and contents premiums—have been left to fend for themselves.

As the anger mounts over the plight of flood victims, local, state and federal Labor politicians have attempted to deflect attention from their own responsibility for the social catastrophe and begun criticising some of the insurance corporations.

The refusal of six insurance companies—Allianz, NRMA, CGU, QBE, Real Insurance, AAMI or RACQ—to attend a recent public meeting of flood victims in Ipswich, where over 3,000 homes were inundated in January, became the occasion for a burst of demagogic posturing from Prime Minister Gillard and other dignitaries.

Gillard declared that insurance companies were “cowardly” for not attending the meeting, while Major General Mick Slater, head of Queensland’s Reconstruction Authority, denounced the insurance corporations as “scumbags.”

These comments are entirely cynical. The Gillard and Bligh Labor governments will not lay a finger on the multi-billion dollar insurance companies. Labor’s demagoguery is part of its increasing efforts to cover up its responsibility for the criminal lack of adequate emergency warnings,

flood mitigation measures and uncontrolled housing construction by local authorities in league with real estate developers in flood prone areas.

This was clearly demonstrated at the Ipswich meeting when flood victim Coral Larsen spoke from the floor. Larsen denounced insurance companies, told the gathering that hundreds of Brisbane flood victims were still “living in sheds and caravans,” and then issued a direct appeal to the Ipswich Labor mayor Paul Pisasale and assistant federal treasurer Bill Shorten, who convened the meeting.

“We need immediate assistance,” Larsen said, “not in three or two months’ time but now... I am begging you authorities here to give us some help. We don’t want an asset test. We’re semi-retirees and we’ve accumulated a little bit in our lifetime, but we’re being penalised because we have a bit of superannuation. It should be equal for every man, woman and child.”

Other residents also asked Pisasale and Shorten why there had been no flood mitigation measures. These questions were deflected with disingenuous “I feel your pain” style responses from Shorten and the mayor.

Shorten told the meeting that a federal government National Disaster Review and current negotiations with the insurance industry would establish a standard “plain-English” flood definition. This, he claimed, would prevent future conflicts. Shorten also threatened to “name and shame” insurance corporations who did the “wrong thing.”

These future assurances are worthless and provide no relief or assistance to the thousands of flood victims and families, whose lives have been devastated by the disaster. In fact, Shorten’s posturing came a few days after Centrelink, the federal government’s welfare agency, stopped accepting disaster relief payment applications from flood victims. The fortnightly \$474.90 payments per adult, which are below the poverty line, last for no more than 13-weeks.

Notwithstanding its token criticism of the insurance corporations, the Gillard Labor government from the outset has refused to provide adequate assistance to ordinary people.

In line with its \$5.6 billion “flood relief” package in January, which was funded by a retrogressive levy, Labor’s principal concerns are to ensure that the mining companies and other major corporations, including insurance, the finance sector and construction, continue to reap massive profits. While two-thirds of the so-called emergency relief package was

funded by cuts to education, health and other social programs, the banks and mining corporations, which raked in multi-billion dollar profits last year, were exempted from the levy.

A few days before the Ipswich meeting, Major General Slater, who was appointed by the Gillard government to head the Queensland Reconstruction Authority, blurted out the real attitude of Australia's ruling elite towards the tens of thousands of Queenslanders attempting to rebuild their lives.

Flood survivors had to recognise "there'll be no quick fixes," Slater declared.

"There are some Queensland communities," he claimed, that were "waiting for someone else to do all that needs to be done... If you look at that same pothole in the road that you drive to work every morning and focusing on it saying why isn't it getting fixed, you're going to suffer and it'll shape your attitude towards other things." Communities, the major general said, had to "broaden their horizons" and "just get on with it."

These comments make clear that there are no essential differences between the response of the Gillard and Bligh Labor governments and that of the Bush administration in the US to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the refusal of the Victorian Labor government to protect its citizens from the 2009 bushfires, and the grossly inadequate response of Japanese authorities to the recent earthquake and tsunami.

While ordinary people have responded by donating millions of dollars and other forms assistance to help overcome the social catastrophe facing disaster-affected communities, the principal concern of government authorities is the budget bottom line and protecting the profit margins of the major corporations, whose interests they serve.

Stephen Tarrant, who has organised several protests with other local residents against his insurer, RACQ, has been living with his wife and 10-year-old son in a tent in the shell of their devastated Ipswich home. Last week the family had to sign a confidentiality agreement with their company before it would give them a payout on their claims.

Tarrant told the *World Socialist Web Site* that he was shocked by the callous response of his insurer and the lengths it went to deny his family's claims.

"All we've done is attempted to secure what we were supposedly entitled to in our policy—nothing more and nothing less," he said. "The company have gone to ridiculous lengths to stop this," he added.

"We used to hold a regular Saturday morning get together at a coffee shop next to RACQ's Ipswich offices and every time we did there'd be a police paddy-wagon mobilised. It was ridiculous. All we did was wear our protest t-shirts and have a coffee together."

Grantham, a small agricultural town in the Lockyer Valley, about 100 kilometres west of the Brisbane, suffered the highest number of fatalities when an eight-metre wall of water hit the settlement on January 10. Seventeen people were killed in the deluge and 20 of the 100 homes in the town completely destroyed.

Grantham community spokesman Marty Warburton told the WSWS this week that flood victims were "sick" of politicians and government bureaucrats visiting the community, making promises but providing no

real assistance.

"It's three months since the floods wiped us out and although there's been plenty of promises it's all tokenistic and designed to paint a nice picture. Politicians come and go through here and get their photos taken for media. They make promises but little changes—they haven't delivered anything. We've almost got to the point where so-called recovery is worse than the event," he said.

"There's been no money from the [Queensland premier] Anna Bligh fund that thousands of people donated to. None of the residents have received anything, and of the 140-150 families that used to be in here, there's only about 20 that have returned to the town.

"The Bligh government says it's helping but there is real anger and hatred here towards the state and federal governments because they're not really doing anything. And there's mountain of red-tape that people have to go through to get any help.

"People who donated the flood relief funds just don't realise the red-tape and the means testing involved for victims to claim assistance. When the water tore through our town it did not discriminate or have a means test on who lived and died," he said.

"My petrol station is still not up and running or the local pub and a few other businesses. I've got to find over \$100,000 replace the four petrol bowsers and the card-reader that were destroyed. I was led to believe that my four bowsers were insured for \$21,000 each but I've now been told that the policy only covered three bowsers and for a total of just \$21,000. I don't know what I'm going to do.

"I'm 40 years of age and have real doubts about whether I'll ever financially recover from this. Three months down the track, I'm basically a charity case and it's the first time I've had to get welfare payments. But what about pensioners and people like that, how are they going to manage? It's very humiliating to be treated this way, I can tell you and people are fed up with it."

"[Assistant federal treasurer] Bill Shorten is running around telling us that he's going to get agreement from the insurance companies about a common flood-definition and hopefully something will be organised on this. I don't think anyone should have to go this sort of conflict but a new definition does nothing to help us now."



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