

Social disaster deepens after third New Zealand earthquake

Tom Peters
18 June 2011

The earthquake-devastated city of Christchurch was shaken by two large aftershocks on Monday afternoon, measuring 5.7 and 6.3 on the Richter scale. The quakes added to the destruction caused by earthquakes which hit the city of 300,000 in September 2010 and February this year. The February 22 quake killed 181 people, making it the country's deadliest natural disaster in 80 years, and destroyed or severely damaged thousands of buildings and houses.

About 45 people received relatively minor injuries in Monday's quake. Dozens of roads and thousands of homes were flooded—many for the third time in nine months—with a mixture of silt, raw sewage and water. The Canterbury District Health Board has warned of a “significant risk of outbreaks of gastroenteritis” due to sewage being discharged into rivers and the sea.

More than 60 suburban roads remain closed or partly closed due to damage. In the city centre, most of which has been closed to the public since February, officials estimate that another 75 buildings will need to be demolished, on top of 900 that collapsed or were seriously damaged in the February quake.

Prime Minister John Key responded to the latest devastation by declaring that his government had a “clear picture” that entire areas of the city would never be rebuilt, but refused to release any details. Working class suburbs in the city's east were the worst hit and the most likely to be abandoned.

International catastrophe modelling firm EQECAT estimates that the latest disaster will add \$NZ6 billion (\$US4.87 billion) to the total cost of rebuilding the city, which had previously been estimated at \$NZ20 billion. Key dismissed EQECAT's figure as “massively overestimated”, but Treasury has not yet provided its own estimate. In its austerity budget announced last month the National Party government allocated just \$5.5 billion for reconstruction.

Power has been restored across the city, but around 6,500 properties are still without running water. Mayor Bob Parker

told the media that there was “massive” damage to water infrastructure. Thousands of people have had no sewerage and have been using portable toilets since February. Some have been without sewerage since September.

As in the previous quakes, the largely working class eastern suburbs received the worst damage and the most liquefaction, when the ground turns to silt. In Heathcote Valley, the underground water basin has risen and fresh water springs have appeared in 50 houses, damaging foundations. The government has announced that thousands of homes will need to be demolished and entire suburbs may need to be abandoned, because the land is too unstable for rebuilding. No details have been announced, leaving residents in a state of limbo.

Since September, the government has provided scant aid for people whose homes are uninhabitable. With overnight temperatures near freezing, thousands of people are still living in cold and unsafe houses, in makeshift accommodation such as tents and caravans, or in overcrowded conditions with friends and relatives.

Those living in damaged buildings face a significant risk of being badly injured or killed in another aftershock and urgently need assistance to relocate to safe housing. GNS Science estimates that there is a 30 percent likelihood that another 6 to 6.9 magnitude quake will hit the region in the next 12 months.

Thousands of people have gone months without being told whether their homes can be repaired. The Earthquake Commission (EQC), the government-owned insurer, has received more than 354,000 claims for damages to houses and contents since the September quake. But to date the EQC has only made 85,300 payments and, according to its web site, it has not even begun “field work” to assess more than 160,000 outstanding claims.

EQC payments are only available to home owners who already have private insurance. The EQC provides coverage up to \$100,000 for damage to houses, after which private coverage kicks in. Speaking to Radio New Zealand on Tuesday, Prime

Minister Key made clear that there is no guarantee home owners will see the full equity of their damaged property restored through payouts or rebuilding. The sums eventually paid out would depend on “a number of different factors” including individual insurance contracts and the outcome of the EQC’s negotiations with private insurers.

The government has not said how long this process will take. Meanwhile, many people who have lost their jobs due to the earthquakes are finding it increasingly difficult to meet mortgage payments. The *Otago Daily Times* reported that at least three banks are preparing for Christchurch home owners to default on their loans.

Residents are increasingly angry about the lack of assistance and information. Joy McManaway, who lives in Christchurch’s east, told TVNZ on Thursday that she had been living in a damaged house without sewerage since September. “It’s atrocious”, she said. “It’s cold, it’s damp, it’s frightening ... I’m not quite sure how to keep going on. It’s just got that bad, it’s just really hell.”

Eli Dayo, who lives in the badly affected suburb of Bexley, told the *Star Canterbury* on Thursday that his property had been flooded with mud for the third time in less than a year. He said: “We just want to know what is going to happen—will they pay us out? They say they’re going to repair, then we hear this whole area will be demolished. No-one knows what’s going on and it is quite stressful.”

Another Bexley resident told TV3: “It’s like living in prison. We’re in a prison that the government has given us.... We’ve lost all our furniture, there’s big cracks in the hall, we’ve had no sewerage since February and now we’ve lost the water.... People’s wellbeing has just gone.”

Many suburban areas are already largely abandoned and thousands more people are desperate to leave. A Fairfax Media poll found that 5,254 people, some 20 percent of respondents, were planning to move away, while a further 6,863 people, 26 percent, said they wanted to leave but were tied to the city by their house or their job. It is estimated that 50,000 people have already left the city.

More workers are now being laid off as a result of the ongoing earthquakes. This week, Christchurch City Council’s events management company Vbase announced that it was sacking 45 full-time staff and cutting around 650 casual jobs. Council-owned venues, including AMI Stadium, the Christchurch Town Hall and the Convention Centre, have been badly damaged and there has been a sharp decline in the number of events hosted.

The government is doing nothing to assist those made redundant or to create new jobs. Paltry relief payments given to workers laid off as a result of previous quakes, which amounted to just \$400 a week or less than the minimum wage, have now been completely phased out. The government has also ended its wage subsidies for local employers who kept staff on.

The opposition Labour Party—which has a number of MPs based in Christchurch—has feigned sympathy for the residents’ plight. But Labour has raised no essential differences with the government’s response to the earthquakes. Port Hills MP Ruth Dyson told the *Otago Daily Times* yesterday that “there was a growing level of frustration [among residents], but that she and other Christchurch-based Labour MPs were trying not to rev it up.” Dyson described the earthquake response as “a bipartisan exercise”.

Both Labour and the Greens are in agreement with the government that the working class across the country must be made to foot the bill through cuts to spending on essential social programs. The Greens have proposed a temporary earthquake levy on workers’ incomes.

While providing virtually nothing for working people, the government has used the disasters in Christchurch to assume extraordinary powers. The Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA), established after the February quake, has the extraordinary power to relax, suspend or extend laws and regulations. It will be able to acquire, hold and dispose of property, and Earthquake Recovery Minister Gerry Brownlee will be able to fast-track planning processes.

As anger and frustration grows, CERA will inevitably use its anti-democratic powers to ensure that reconstruction proceeds in the interests of big business at the expense of working people. Another clear indication that the government is preparing to confront working class opposition is the announcement that army personnel will remain in the city for the next six months to guard the CBD cordon.



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