Australia: Government platitudes at Queensland flood memorials

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The first anniversary of disastrous floods that swept through the northern-eastern Australian state of Queensland in January 2011 has been marked with memorial events in Toowomba, the Lockyer Valley, Ipswich and Brisbane's West End. The floods killed 35 people, inundated over 29,000 homes and seriously damaged vital infrastructure. Hundreds of survivors and ordinary people have honoured the memory of lost loved ones.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Queensland Labor Premier Anna Bligh attended these events and feigned their concern. The aim of their speeches was to divert attention from the lack of emergency warnings, grossly inadequate rescue and flood mitigation measures, and other cost-cutting decisions that drastically worsened the catastrophe and for which their governments and previous administrations are responsible.

Gillard told a memorial service in Gatton that a wet and muddy Australian flag presented to her last year from the Lockyer Valley was an "enduring symbol" of the flood. It represented, she declared, "courage and endurance" and "spoke about what it means to be Australian."

Premier Bligh praised the "determination" of Grantham residents, where 18 men, women and children were swept to their deaths when the small Lockyer Valley community was hit an eight-metre wall of water on January 10. No mention was made by Gillard or Bligh, or in any of the extensive media reportage, that these tragic deaths occurred because residents were given no official warnings about the approaching inland tsunami.

Gillard and Bligh, of course, could not ignore the undoubted heroism and self-sacrifice of flood survivors and tens of thousands of ordinary citizens and paid lip service to it in their speeches. These references, however, were entirely cynical. The numerous individual acts of heroism—by flood victims, emergency crews, private helicopter pilots and hundreds of other working people—were only necessary because of the inadequacy of flood prevention measures and the decay of emergency services.

Emergency pre-planning, in fact, was virtually non-existent or dysfunctional, with communities literally left to fend for themselves. In Brisbane, most of the immediate clean up was undertaken by local residents and over 30,000 volunteers in the days and weeks after the floods.

Federal emergency reconstruction assistance was largely directed towards repairing transport infrastructure for the major mining and agribusiness corporations, with a pittance paid to families and small businesses. This was funded by a national levy on ordinary wage earners and through cuts to education and other social programs. Emergency assistance from the Queensland Premiers Appeal provided on average just over $1,800 per person to 40,000 claimants, with about 4,400 households paid additional for some rebuilding costs.

More than 7,000 residents, who thought they had insurance coverage, had their claims rejected or disputed by insurance corporations which used deliberately ambiguous flood policy clauses to wheedle out of paying victims. Hundreds of others unable to pay expensive premiums lost everything in the deluge.

Media claims over the past week of government support for flood-ravaged communities and headlines hailing a "mood of hope" in devastated communities are a fraud. Life remains difficult for thousands of flood victims.

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Hundreds of families are struggling to maintain mortgage payments on damaged homes, many of them still uninhabitable, that they cannot afford to repair.

In Grantham, where over 130 homes were badly damaged or destroyed, half of the small community's poverty-stricken residents have been unable to rebuild or take up a land-swap deal on nearby higher ground. In the Brisbane satellite city of Ipswich, almost 300 severely flood damaged homes and businesses are still not fixed. Thousands of kilometres of roads remain unrepaired.

Recommendations issued by the Queensland flood inquiry interim report for modified emergency warning systems, flood mapping and more flood and rain gauges have not been implemented or are incomplete.

Recent modifications to the operational procedures of the Wivenhoe Dam, a facility previously claimed by state authorities to have flood-proofed Brisbane but which proved unable to cope with the deluge in January last year, have been criticised by experts as dangerously inadequate. Likewise, no plans have been proposed by the Queensland Labor government or the opposition for the construction of flood mitigation facilities or new dams.

Urgent infrastructure repairs and upgrades in Brisbane and various regional towns have also been delayed because the state and federal governments refuse to provide local councils with adequate funding.

Desperately needed modifications to Toowoomba's drainage system, for example, which was overwhelmed in last year's disaster and turned the city into a raging torrent will not occur for another 20 years. Residents' petitions and local council appeals to the federal and state governments to fund the upgrade were rejected last year, ensuring that the city will likely be seriously flooded during the next major downpour.

These responses are not an aberration but in line with official reactions to recent natural disasters in Australia and internationally—from Hurricane Katrina in the US in 2005, the 2009 Black Friday bushfires in Victoria, and the recent New Zealand and Japanese earthquakes. While huge natural forces have been involved, their impact could in each case been greatly lessened with proper planning, preventative measures, emergency services and reconstruction, all of which have been undermined and eroded in recent decades under the banner of pro-market restructuring.

Twelve months on from the Queensland floods, the platitudes of state and federal leaders are another attempt to cover up the fact that capitalism is incompatible with the interests of the majority.

Extraordinary developments have been made in weather forecasting, hydrology, telecommunications, and building construction, advances that could drastically minimise the impact of extreme natural events. The widespread use of these technologies, however, is deemed too expensive by governments that regard as intolerable any social expenditure that impacts on the profit margins of the major corporations or threatens governments' budget bottom lines.

By contrast, the public response in Queensland and throughout Australia to assist survivors to help rebuild their lives not only revealed the self-sacrifice and elemental collective determination of ordinary people to overcome the disaster—in contrast to the individualism and dog-eat-dog ethos promoted by capitalism.

Last year's floods provide another demonstration that what is required is a fundamental reorganisation of society so that the resources necessary to protect ordinary people from all future natural disasters are made available. This poses the need to fight for a workers' government and socialist program to place the banks, insurance, mining and other major corporations under the democratic control of the majority, not the interests of the financial elite.

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