

Residents face bitter winter in New Zealand's quake-hit city

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30 March 2013

Residents of the New Zealand city of Christchurch, devastated by the 6.3-magnitude earthquake that killed 185 people in February 2011, are facing a bitter winter. While the National Party government, city council and business investors concentrate on rebuilding the central business district, thousands of people, particularly those in working class suburbs, are into their third year of unresolved social stress and personal dislocation.

According to a report in the *Dominion Post* on March 25, health and social agencies are bracing themselves for the effects of influenza, cold weather and “shameful” living conditions. Christchurch winters can be harsh, with frosts, low temperatures and occasional snow.

The city's health agencies are reported to be ringing “alarm bells.” The Canterbury District Health Board (CDHB) is moving to insulate the city's coldest and dampest homes. The Red Cross is planning to distribute winter warmer packs to those in need and send volunteers door-knocking in the worst-affected suburbs.

CDHB member Andrew Dickerson said he was concerned about the “growing sense of despair” in some areas. Damaged, damp and overcrowded homes meant communicable diseases like influenza, whooping cough and measles could flourish this winter, putting increased strain on a health system already under pressure. “The conditions some people are now living in I never expected to see in New Zealand,” he said.

Another CDHB member, Anna Crichton, warned that there was “every indication this winter will be worse than the last”, with many people now at “breaking point.” Medical officer Dr Ramon Pink said housing, employment and rental availability were “big issues” even before the usual winter illnesses and extreme weather conditions are added.

The *Press* reported on March 20 that a health “time

bomb” was ready to erupt, due to liquefied silt still festering beneath houses. Silt littered with fungi is piled up against the floorboards of some houses, causing them to rot. In other houses it has crept into the walls, causing mould to grow. Some 65 percent of Central New Brighton families live in unrepaid homes, with some still having to pay to have raw sewage drained from their property. Among parents of children at the Central New Brighton school, 23 percent lost jobs because of the quakes.

According to a TV One report on January 29, “horror stories” of families living in garages and tents continue to surface. Some families remained stranded in sheds or overcrowded friends' and relatives' houses.

The plight of one family was detailed on the Fairfax “Stuff” website on March 25. Jean Nel, 47, lives in a Woolston home with her two eldest sons and one of their partners, who has an 11-month-old baby suffering from a lung condition. Nel's youngest son, Reenen de Bruin, 17, and his girlfriend Sydney live in the garage. The house lost both of its chimneys in the quake, there is an exposed manhole in one bedroom and, with no insulation, the heat pump barely warms the living room, leaving it “as cold as a fridge.” The only heat source is a fan heater, resulting in a \$400 power bill last month. The baby, Miniah, who was born with a hole in her diaphragm, has already been hospitalised twice in six months.

Demand on social services continues to increase: people who have never needed help before are queuing up at food banks. City Missioner Michael Gorman said the unprecedented demand on the mission's alcohol and drug services, foodbank and night shelters “has not eased at all.”

High rents show no sign of abating. According to recent official figures, rents rose between 7 and 21

percent in Christchurch last year, depending on suburb.

Tenants Protection Association manager Helen Gatonyi believes this year is “shaping up to be the worst,” adding: “When winter strikes this year, we predict it's going to be very difficult for a large number of people.” Some tenants were renting cramped, damp three-bedroom homes for more than \$500 a week. “The behaviour of some landlords is totally unacceptable. They are renting homes for an arm and a leg, knowing there will be a queue of people lining up to view the place,” Gatonyi commented.

Home owners face their own raft of problems. Many are bogged down in endless disputes with the Earthquake Commission (EQC) and insurance companies, which are doing everything they can to minimise their financial obligations to clients with damaged or unliveable houses.

Earlier this month, Matt and Valerie O’Loughlin, a couple from the red-zoned (i.e. designated uninhabitable) suburb of Dallington, sued insurance company Tower, fighting for the full replacement cost of their home, rather than just the repair costs. The couple sought up to \$700,000 for the replacement of their home, and also claimed \$50,000 general damages. Tower had offered to pay for repair work totalling \$337,000, which the O’Loughlin’s lawyer Grant Shand said was half of what is required. He said they were covered under a natural disaster clause in their policy, which entitled them to the replacement of a “fully functional house” in the “same condition and extent as when new.”

It was not tenable for the house to be repaired in a red zone, where there were no other houses being repaired, Shand said. An inability to ensure continuing insurance cover on the repaired house and a lack of services in the area such as running water would mean it was not fully-functional. Valerie O’Loughlin said: “It wasn’t really our choice to go to court, but we couldn’t get Tower to move. We just want a fair price for our home. We don’t want to pay for repair costs because we didn’t take out a repair policy.”

The case is not atypical. This week, EQC was responsible for the accidental emailing of a spreadsheet containing details of 83,000 quake claimants. The document covered every claim up to \$100,000 in value, including EQC’s original estimate of the cost of repairing damage and the bids received from

contractors. Claiming “commercial sensitivity,” EQC has for two years withheld the information from claimants, who have been demanding it in order to make decisions about their lives.

With the support of opposition Labour Party and the Greens, the government has used the disaster as a pretext for cuts to essential services—both nationally and in Christchurch. Last month, the government defied protests and confirmed the closure or merger of 19 schools, while the city’s poor areas have been earmarked for the introduction of publicly funded but private “Charter Schools.” The ruling National Party has tried to pressure the city council to privatise assets, and rates are being raised to force residents pay their “share” of rebuild costs. Labour, the Greens and the unions have all accepted the inevitability of cuts to basic services, demanding only their right to be involved in “consultation.”



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