

New Zealand: Five years after the Christchurch earthquake

Tom Peters, Matthew Carrington
1 March 2016

February 22 marked five years since a 6.3 magnitude earthquake struck the city of Christchurch and the surrounding Canterbury area in New Zealand's South Island. The earthquake killed 185 people, destroyed tens of thousands of homes and buildings and caused widespread damage to roads and sewerage systems. It followed a large and damaging quake in September 2010.

Five years on, entire suburbs have been abandoned and large areas of the central city remain rubble-strewn. Since 2011, there have been thousands of aftershocks, compounding the damage. Most recently a quake on February 14 produced further destruction, resulting in more than 2,000 new insurance claims. Overwhelmingly, however, the ruin of the lives of tens of thousands of residents has been caused by the government and corporate response, not the earthquakes themselves.

At the official commemorations in Christchurch's Botanic Gardens, Governor-General Jerry Mateparae was forced to admit that since the quakes "there has been financial hardship, agonising stress, and years of frustration." He added: "My hope is that the end of this period is fast approaching, and that these people will be able to carry on with their lives with renewed optimism and energy." Mayor Lianne Dalziel similarly said "our experience has been traumatic for everyone and for many it will take a lot more time to heal."

The speakers treated this "traumatic" experience as the inevitable outcome of a natural disaster. In reality, working class people have been abandoned by the National Party government, which has protected the interests of big business, including the insurance industry, and provided grossly inadequate assistance to people whose homes have been damaged or destroyed.

Speaking to Radio NZ, Earthquake Recovery

Minister Gerry Brownlee declared that "a huge amount of rebuild work has been done, and a huge amount of residential work also completed, with people getting back to rebuilding their lives."

For thousands of residents, this is a fraud. The day before the anniversary almost 1,000 people protested in the city centre, demanding an external review of the handling of insurance claims by the government's Earthquake Commission (EQC). The protesters also called for an official deadline by which insurance companies would have to settle claims.

One protester, Miranda Rout, told Radio NZ she had moved house four times since the quake and "we still don't know when we're going to have a home again." She denounced her insurance company IAG as "a huge multi-billion dollar private entity who have made money off our backs and are still trying to wear everybody down."

Approximately 5,000 home owners are still waiting for insurers to settle their claims. Many people have been living in overcrowded, badly damaged or makeshift housing for half a decade, leading to health problems from dampness and mould. Due to substandard workmanship, EQC has been forced to re-examine at least 5,500 of its repair jobs.

There have been endless disputes over settlement offers. According to the Insurance Council, 89 percent of property claims have been settled. These settlements, however, are frequently the result of coercion and fall short of what is required to repair, rebuild or buy another house. House prices and rents have both risen by approximately 50 percent since the earthquakes.

A former contract worker who did repair work for EQC and IAG told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Lateline" program on February 16 that people had been bullied into accepting repairs that left

them “worse off than what they were in the beginning.” She said home owners were told: “‘Sign it or we don’t do it.’ It’s as simple as that. So if you are at the end of your tether and you’ve been dealing with it for three, four years—two years, even—or you’re elderly or you’re unwell ... people just took it.”

New Zealand’s Reserve Bank reported in January that insurance claims for Christchurch’s earthquakes have, on average, taken longer to settle than similar earthquakes in Chile and Japan that occurred around the same time. The report predicts that the overall rebuild of the city—including infrastructure and commercial buildings—will only pass the halfway mark later this year.

Speaking on behalf of the government, Brownlee dismissed criticism of insurance companies, including the EQC and the government-owned company Southern Response, saying they had “been extremely successful and very, very helpful in the overall rebuild.”

There is widespread and palpable hostility to the government over the endless delays. Halfway through Brownlee’s Radio NZ interview on the streets of Christchurch, which was televised online, a passing driver shouted: “Gerry Brownlee you suck! You’ve done a bad job!”

During official commemorations later in the day, John Howland, whose 14-year-old son Jayden died in the 2011 earthquake, hurled a mixture of flour and chocolate at Brownlee’s face. Howland, who was arrested and charged with assault, told media that the government was “heartless ... They’re not taking care of all the [quake] families—like us, and everybody else. There needs to be more support, more communication, and just compassion really.”

Speaking to TVNZ, Labour Party leader Andrew Little closed ranks with Brownlee, denouncing Howland as a “scumbag” and his protest as “despicable.”

The lack of support has left many residents psychologically distressed. Christchurch doctor Jeremy Baker told Radio NZ: “Suicide rates are rising, depression and anxiety are in no way being covered, I think, by present services.” Since 2011, the number of suicide-related emergency callouts in the region has risen by 55 percent.

A study of 320 children aged five to seven by the

University of Canterbury found that 64 percent showed one or more symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder at the end of 2015. One in five showed six or more symptoms, but fewer than one in ten had access to counselling.

As part of its spending cuts to welfare and health services throughout the country, the government has drastically reduced funding for psychological services provided by community groups in Canterbury from \$1.6 million a year ago to just \$200,000. The District Health Board is under pressure to make further cutbacks.

The opposition Labour Party has criticised the cuts and recently called on the government to take over any unresolved insurance claims at the end of the year. However, the party has no fundamental differences with the government’s austerity agenda or the subordination of people’s lives and livelihoods to the profit calculations of the financial and corporate elite.

Mayor Dalziel, a former Labour government minister, has worked closely with the National government to protect big business and impose the cost of the rebuild on the working class. The city council has cut staff, increased rates and begun to sell off assets to help fund its share of the rebuild. Reports commissioned by the council have identified a funding gap of \$883 million.

More cuts are inevitable. On February 24, the council received a \$603 million insurance payout covering more than 1,600 claims for quake damage to its above-ground assets. The deal, reached after more than a year of negotiations with insurance companies AIG, Axis and R+V, falls well short of the \$920 million that the council initially sought.

Five years after the earthquake, the rebuild debacle—in which thousands of lives have been wrecked by the government and big business—stands as an indictment of the rapacious system of private profit that is defended by the entire political establishment.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact