Australian flood victims speak out: “The only assistance is locals helping each other out.”

Our reporters
28 March 2021

Over the weekend, WSWS reporters spoke to people in Windsor, a town that sits on the Hawkesbury River, north of Sydney, and residents of the Central Coast, further north. Both areas were hard hit by floods last week that engulfed vast swathes of the New South Wales and southeastern Queensland.

Tens of thousands of people were forced to evacuate their homes last week. With the floodwaters subsiding, many are returning to severely damaged properties, without insurance and with only a pittance of assistance from the authorities.

The interviews spoke about the difficulties they face, as well as the responsibility of government policies for the severity of the disaster.

In Windsor, **Blake**, 27, has been without tap water or electricity for several days, and has had to rely on neighbours.

“On Sunday morning [March 21], I woke up and it looked exactly like it does now. From then on, the water was rising at 400 millimetres an hour.”

“We’re glad we snapped into gear. The SES [State Emergency Service] came around Sunday late evening, knocking on doors telling us they would probably get our side of the street to evacuate. But we had already taken off to our parents.”

The only notification Blake’s household received was from the Bureau of Meteorology Weather app. “There definitely needs to be more communication, whether from the council or the government,” Blake said. “One of our neighbours wasn’t prepared at all. She was at work and lost everything.”

Last Tuesday, the water rose through the floorboards to shin height because the house does not have a concrete slab foundation.

Mel, Blake’s partner, commented: “We’re not too sure what the water carries but it can’t be good. It will definitely be carrying diseases and there is a big risk of black mould. We put a lot of hard work into the place, a lot of money as well. It will set us back a fair bit to rip out the floorboards and any gyprock.”

Referring to the spill-over of Warragamba Dam, Sydney’s main water source, which contributed to the scale of the flooding, Blake said: “I don’t think we need to keep that dam at 97 percent full. If we get another storm like this the same thing will happen. But if they kept it at 80 percent it would make a massive difference. They need to manage the dam better. If they lift the dam and keep it at 98 percent full then it doesn’t change much, in fact it makes it worse for us down here.”

Like many of their neighbours, Blake and Mel did not have flood insurance. With premiums of $25,000 or more commonplace, they assessed that it would be cheaper to deal with costs out of pocket whenever flooding occurred. “No one on the street can afford that, especially when they keep saying it’s a 1 in 100-year flood,” Blake said.

“Last year we got 400 to 500 mm of rain in two days. It came up most of the way up the backyard and missed our garage by a few metres. They were saying that was a 1 in 50 or a 1 in 100-year flood, and now just a year later we have another one. We bought here 18 months ago on the harshest water restrictions. We couldn’t water lawns, wash the car, and only a month later the whole place was flooded. They said it was a minor flood. It was still 9 metres.”

“The only assistance we’ve had is a $1,000 government flood package. That paid for our stuff in storage, but we obviously have to move back in and hire trucks and $1,000 doesn’t go too far. Supposedly they’re giving us skip bins or free tipping, but we haven’t heard from them.”

“We had the Rural Fire Service here Friday. They helped us move all the insulation under the floors but were called away because they weren’t qualified. They were a massive help for us, but I feel a bit selfish that we

© World Socialist Web Site

got them and no one else on the street did. One of our neighbours is a grandmother who lives by herself. She's got family there to help. The only assistance is locals helping each other out."

Patrick, 22, works in refrigeration, air conditioning and electrical repairs. "I've been without power since Wednesday. I wasn't home when they unhooked it because I've been working all week," he said.

"Sunday I was here and started clearing it out and getting it ready. I just bought this place two months ago, so I didn't know what to expect. My neighbour warned me and asked me what I was going to do about a flood, so I looked it up on the news.

"I never got a warning from anyone, except the neighbours, but I didn't need anyone to tell me to get out of the house. On Sunday morning my dad and neighbours told me the water was going to be 15 metres high. I checked that in the *Hawkesbury News*. The contour map had the street at 13 metres, so I acted. I didn't get an alert on my phone. The only alert I got was that the power company was coming to turn off the power."

Patrick said ordinary people had assisted greatly: "People just drop past all the time. On Sunday people drove past even though it's a cul-de-sac, asking if we needed a hand. I don't think they lived in the street. A lady came and gave me cookies. Another man was just here from two suburbs over and said if I needed any food, clothes, water, the community centre has heaps of stuff and they are more than willing to drop it off if I need.

"The community has been very nice. There's nothing like something bad happening to bring everyone together and that is what has happened here. Now everyone waves at each other, we know everyone's names, people are lending things. It's a very nice street.

"I haven't got the $1,000 assistance yet. I called up for it the other day and couldn't get through to anyone. I kind of just left it at that. Even though you always need money, at that moment I wasn't thinking about money."

Floodwaters at Berkeley Vale, a town on the Central Coast, north of Sydney, reached 1.5 metres above sea-level. This meant they were approximately waist high.

Luke, who has lived in the area for 20 years, said that during that time, he had seen seven floods but that the council and other authorities have done nothing to mitigate the risks. "There were no evacuation orders in this flood that just passed or any other flood since I've lived here," he said.

"Not even when the ground floors of some of these houses were almost completely submerged in water. I've had no instructions, no evacuation orders, nothing. People are just left to fend for themselves."

Jeremy, another resident, added: "The rains were heavier this year than previously, but the flood wasn't as big as the one that occurred in February 2020 after the Black Summer bushfires. The reason is that a local resident, who also happened to be a professional excavator, just got so sick of the council doing absolutely nothing for us here that he went on his own and excavated a channel into the lake so that water can funnel back into the lake a lot smoother. He got into a lot of trouble from the local council, who didn't do anything. But if it hadn't been for that, the flooding would have been a lot worse I guarantee you."

Alana said: "In February last year, we had water up to our front steps and through parts of the house. If it wasn't for the man excavating the channel we would have been under again. That guy was taken to court by the council. He had to set up a GoFundMe page to help pay off his $60,000 in legal fees.

"There are no plans around here for flood emergencies, not even to check up on your neighbours. Last year, for example, an elderly man nearby was electrocuted on the first floor of his house because the ground floor was submerged and the electricity grid hadn't been turned off.

"Another major issue is the sewerage. Every time it floods, or even just rains heavily, the pumping station goes under water. We have had sewage, effluent, toilet paper come up into our laundry sink and the bathroom, and the concrete pipes out the front of our house. The sewerage treatment plant is in desperate need of being fixed. It's needed to be fixed for a couple of decades probably."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site