

Australia: Floods hit Sydney as Brisbane, Lismore face further storms

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More than half a million people in New South Wales (NSW) have received evacuation orders or “high alert” warnings as the flood crisis continues. Dozens of the 76 evacuation orders in place affect suburbs in the southwest, west and northwest of Sydney, the largest city in Australia.

An intense low-pressure system off the east coast has produced heavy rainfall over the past week, causing record-breaking floods impacting a 1,500-kilometre stretch (900 miles) from South East Queensland to the NSW South Coast. At least 14 people have died.

Brisbane and Lismore are again being hit by severe thunderstorms, bringing heavy rain, large hail stones and possible flash flooding as residents struggle to clean up damage and recover belongings after the devastating floods earlier in the week.

Circumstances are particularly dire in Lismore, where residents now face food shortages and are rapidly running out of potable water. Major roads, including parts of the Pacific Highway from Sydney to Brisbane, remain closed due to flood damage, preventing trucks from delivering fresh supplies.

This isolation comes after residents were essentially left to battle the floods alone on Monday, with no warning and minimal assistance from emergency services, aside from the woefully under-resourced local State Emergency Service (SES) branch.

Heavy rain and damaging winds continue to hammer the Sydney region, after some areas recorded more than 100 millimetres of rain in the 24 hours to 9 a.m. today. Similar rainfall is expected today in the Hunter, Central Coast and northern Sydney regions.

While rainfall in Sydney today has not been as high as predicted, thunderstorms and heavy rain are forecast for the weekend and into next week, meaning the danger is far from over.

Major flooding has occurred in parts of the Nepean and Hawkesbury Rivers on Sydney’s western fringes. The Hawkesbury is expected to pass the “major flood” level of 12.2 metres at Windsor this afternoon, and will likely surpass the record highs of March 2021.

The Windsor Bridge, touted as “flood proof” when it was constructed in 2020 at a cost of \$101 million, and the Richmond Bridge were both closed yesterday, cutting off a number of suburbs on Sydney’s northwest fringe.

Further flooding is expected on the Georges River at Picnic Point, Liverpool and Milperra in the city’s southwest. Indicating the severity of the crisis, residents who have lived in these areas for decades say they have never before been told to evacuate.

The severe weather and flooding has forced the closure of major arterial roads, as well as the cancellation of train, bus and ferry services. Many people in flood-prone Sydney suburbs whose houses are on high-enough ground to escape flooding face isolation as roads are cut off by the rising waters.

More than 250 schools across NSW are closed due to flooding and road closures.

Warragamba Dam, Sydney’s main water catchment facility, reached capacity early yesterday morning and is discharging water at a rate of around 600 gigalitres of water per day, higher than the 460 gigalitre peak last year.

As was the case in last year’s floods, the dam was kept at 97 percent capacity in the lead up to the massive downpours and early staged releases were not carried out to try to mitigate the floods until Tuesday.

Similarly, in Brisbane, controlled releases did not begin at Wivenhoe Dam until Friday, although heavy rain was forecast by the Bureau of Meteorology three days earlier.

This apparent lack of planning runs much deeper than dam management, however. Over decades, huge swathes of land on flood plains have been opened up for residential development, despite the well-known risks. As wages have stagnated or fallen in real terms amid rapidly rising cost of inflation, with housing as a primary driver, more and more working-class families have been forced out to these low-lying areas.

The NSW government plans to allow more than 130,000 people to move into the flood plains downstream from Warragamba Dam by 2050. While raising the height of the dam has been flagged as a possible mitigation, the proposal has encountered criticism from experts, who warn that doing so would only result in worse flooding when the greater capacity is exceeded, and flood waters come from other sources than dam overflow.

The Insurance Council of Australia said yesterday more than 48,000 claims had been filed for flood damage, with the total damage bill likely to reach up to \$2 billion.

However, many residents in flood-stricken areas are uninsured, or have insurance that does not cover flood damage. Contrary to NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet's absurd claim of a "one in a thousand-year flood," insurance companies are well aware that major floods are a regular occurrence in these areas and demand massively increased premiums as a result.

For many of the predominantly working-class inhabitants of the worst-affected areas, the cost of insurance is prohibitive. A 2020 report by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, focussed on insurance prices in Australia's tropical north, where cyclones and severe storms are most common, found that home and contents insurance cost are almost 80 percent more in these areas than the national average.

The 2021 federal budget included \$10 billion "to ensure Australians in cyclone-prone areas have access to affordable insurance." The relevant legislation is still before parliament.

Even if passed, it is likely the measure will do nothing to drive down insurance costs for working-class people. The government's plan is to commit this money to a "reinsurance pool," effectively guaranteeing the policies of private insurance companies. The only certainty is that this will boost the

profits of these multinational financial giants, which will still be free to price policies however they see fit, despite the massively reduced risk.

In contrast to the vast sums planned to prop up private insurers, the NSW SES has an annual budget of just \$405 million to carry out rescue and recovery operations during flood and storm emergencies. Last year, the service responded to around 43,000 emergency calls, including more than 15,000 in March alone. Like the similarly underfunded Rural Fire Service, the SES is almost entirely staffed by volunteers.

Federal Treasurer Josh Frydenberg said this morning that about 145,000 claims have been filed for the federal government's miserly "disaster recovery payment" of \$1,000 per adult and \$400 per child.

Under fire from the public over the lack of preparation and response to the floods, Frydenberg said: "We're always investing in disaster resilience. We're always investing in ways to improve the strength of our economy to withstand these disasters."

This statement makes clear that the priorities of the ruling elite have nothing to do with protecting the lives and homes of the population but are entirely focussed on the interests of big business.

This is entirely in line with the attitude of all Australian governments to the COVID-19 pandemic, during which mass infection, illness and death has been allowed, even encouraged, in order to enable the continued profits of the wealthy elite.

A rational approach to development, in which the safety of residents is not entirely subordinated to the profit demands of property developers, is not possible under capitalism. What is required is a fight for a socialist perspective and workers' governments, in which major planning decisions are made in the interests of the masses, emergency and health services are given the necessary resources to deal with natural disasters, and workers whose homes are damaged or destroyed are not left homeless or destitute.



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