

Australia's floods: An indictment of capitalism

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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The floods that have shattered communities across large areas of Australia's eastern states over the past week have further demonstrated the indifference of governments—Coalition and Labor—for the health, lives and livelihoods of ordinary working people.

Coming on top of the 2019–20 bushfire catastrophe and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the floods have further laid bare their failure to take the necessary steps to protect the population from such disasters.

Every aspect of the floods crisis—from the lack of preparation and warnings to people, to the inadequacy of basic infrastructure and support services, and the lack of assistance offered to the hundreds of thousands of flood victims—is the direct result of the subordination of society to the dictates of private profit.

Over the past week, at least 16 lives have been lost, and some people are still unaccounted for. More storms and flooding are predicted. Already, thousands of homes have been destroyed or severely damaged, especially in poor and working-class areas where most residents are not insured because of the exorbitant cost of premiums or the refusal of the insurance giants to cover flood damage.

More than a week after the floods first engulfed homes and small businesses, many people still have no power or food and fuel supplies, and entire towns and regions remain without essential Internet services and reliable phone coverage, adding to the dangers and trauma of the emergency. For days on end, flood victims have been unable to even contact emergency services to be rescued, access critical safety information or get in touch with their families.

In the world's 13th largest economy there are people who have gone for days without food, clothing or shelter. Many are yet to see any government-organised assistance.

Just two years ago, governments—state and federal—left thousands of people unprotected and abandoned during bushfires that ravaged large areas of eastern Australia and enveloped cities and towns, including the country's two largest cities—Sydney and Melbourne, in a pall of smoke. As with the floods, essential services that have been run down over decades were simply not able to cope.

Governments have also let loose the COVID-19 virus right at the point when the threats posed by the highly infectious Omicron strain emerged in Australia. The scrapping of virtually all public health restrictions has led to a massive surge of infections, hospitalisations and deaths putting huge strains on the hospital system.

While governments and the media promote the lie that the pandemic is all but over, last month recorded the highest number of deaths per day. Workers and students are being pushed back into workplaces, schools and universities for the sake of corporate profit at the expense of the health and lives of the population.

The demand for people to “live with the virus” is matched by the insistence that people must live with floods and fires, and take “individual responsibility” and somehow make themselves “resilient.”

There have been shocking scenes. People have been forced to cling for

their lives for hours on rooftops, unable to get help from emergency services. Most were eventually rescued only through the often dangerous and heroic efforts of fellow residents, who arrived with boats and kayaks. These selfless responses are in stark contrast to the failures of the governments, federal, state and municipal.

For the second time in 11 years, Brisbane and its surrounding regions have been devastated, with the damage more widespread than in the 2011 floods. Up to 20,000 homes have been affected in the country's third largest city, with the worst damage in working-class areas such as Goodna, Logan and Beenleigh.

Queensland's state Labor Party Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk defended her government's failure to adequately prepare or warn people in time for them to save their possessions and evacuate. She claimed that weather forecasts had kept changing, but the Bureau of Meteorology issued a specific warning on February 23 that a slow-moving low pressure system was dragging water from the sea and dumping it over the coastline. “There has been torrential rain for two days and there is much more to come,” it stated.

The same weather system struck Lismore, a northern New South Wales (NSW) regional city of 44,000 people. A life-threatening wall of water swept through the lower working-class area of the city, swamping some 14,000 homes at about 3am last Monday. No official warning was provided to residents. The city's inadequate levee was overwhelmed, as it was most recently in 2017, but the NSW government's Special Emergency Services (SES) had only two boats on hand to rescue stranded survivors.

Governments and the media have depicted the floods as simply a natural disaster, describing it as a “rain bomb.” In reality, even though the weather systems involved are extreme, the destructive outcomes are the result of profit-driven and cost-cutting political decisions.

Profit-driven and cost-cutting decisions

Lack of disaster preparation: Despite the growing frequency of disasters, the federal Liberal-National government's \$4 billion Emergency Response Fund has hardly spent a cent on disaster recovery since the fund's creation in 2019, just before the black summer bushfires. Just \$150 million had been set aside for disaster-mitigation projects and much less than that has actually been spent.

By contrast, more than \$400 billion has been handed to business during the pandemic and \$250 billion has been allocated for military spending in preparations for a US-led war against China. While the government failed to assist residents for days, it rushed to send \$70 million to NATO to buy weapons for Ukrainian forces as part of the escalating confrontation with Russia.

Inadequate and privatised infrastructure: Dams built in previous decades to protect populations against floods, such as Sydney's Warragamba Dam and Brisbane's Wivenhoe Dam, have been known to be inadequate for years. The Wivenhoe dam, completed in 1984, after terrible floods in 1974, has not met national safety guidelines for large dams since about 2002. Levees in rural cities such as Lismore are likewise sub-standard. Freeways, local roads, rail networks and drainage systems have proven inadequate as well, quickly being swamped. Corporate-controlled and privatised Internet and phone services have dangerously broken down, blacking out entire regions for days on end.

Housing development in flood-prone areas: Government figures blame ordinary people for supposedly choosing to live in vulnerable areas, but successive governments, at the behest of property developers, have allowed further housing projects in areas susceptible to floods. Because of soaring house prices and falling real wages, working-class families often have no option but to live in these low-lying areas. According to the Insurance Council of Australia, 2 to 3 percent of homes nationally are now in frequent flood zones and 15 percent are susceptible to flood. With about 10 million households in Australia, that equals 200,000 to 1.5 million households living in danger!

Prohibitive cost of disaster insurance: More and more residents living in these zones cannot afford or have been denied flood insurance coverage, leaving many flood victims facing financial ruin and possible homelessness. This insurance crisis will worsen as the companies hike up premiums again due to the floods. The response of Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government has been to subsidise the insurance giants by giving them a \$10 billion guarantee to cover any losses from cyclones in northern Australia.

Reliance on volunteers and the military: The chronically under-resourced SES agencies in each state, like the firefighting services in the bushfire crisis, depend almost entirely on volunteers who put their lives on the line without being paid. In NSW, with a land size almost 3.5 times that of the UK, the SES relies on some 9,000 volunteers, with just over 300 paid staff. In every major disaster, these services have been overwhelmed quickly, requiring people to take matters into their own hands.

Successive governments have exploited the lack of adequate civil disaster services to send in the troops to create the political climate for the use of the military to suppress social and political unrest. The Gillard Labor government mobilised more than 1,500 military personnel after the 2011 Brisbane floods, and the Morrison Coalition government has invoked emergency powers to do so again, as it did during the bushfire crisis.

Relief payments for business, pittances for residents: People whose homes have been damaged or destroyed have been offered a pittance—just \$1,000 per adult and \$400 per child in one-off disaster payments, plus possible 13-week income replacement payments. By contrast, Morrison and NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet jointly announced grants of up to \$75,000 for primary producers and up to \$50,000 for small businesses.

Climate change: Because of the heavy reliance of energy giants on fossil fuel revenues, the response of Australian governments, even compared to the totally inadequate measures taken internationally, is criminally irresponsible.

While individual extreme weather events cannot be traced directly to global warming, the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report found that catastrophic flooding is becoming more likely. Scientific studies show that each 1C of heating due to greenhouse gas emissions allows the atmosphere to hold about 7 percent more moisture.

While governments have left residents to fend for themselves, however, ordinary people have come together, as they did in the bushfire calamity, to rescue victims and provide food, shelter and assistance to those in need, using Facebook and other social media platforms to organise independently.

This embryonic self-organisation by the working class needs to be informed by a socialist perspective and developed into a mass movement fighting to take political power in Australia and internationally. Workers need to establish their own rank-and-file committees in workplaces and working-class areas and neighbourhoods independent of the pro-capitalist parties and trade unions to fight for:

- * The establishment of timely warning systems, including the expansion of meteorological and associated services, to cover the entire country and population.

- * A vast expansion of paid civilian emergency and health services to respond to crises such as fires, floods and the COVID-19 pandemic.

- * The establishment of a national public insurance fund to compensate individual losses and provide for the reconstruction and rebuilding of communities.

- * A massive expansion of flood protection infrastructure in a coordinated plan to prevent the inundation of flood-prone areas.

- * The establishment of a resilient and comprehensive telecommunication network to guarantee timely warning and communications in times of emergency, including regional, rural and remote areas.

- * Climate change is a global emergency that cannot be resolved on a local or national basis but requires an international, scientifically-based plan to halt and reverse global warming.

All of these measures come into conflict with a society dominated by the insatiable drive for private profit and the conflicting interests of national states, over and above the essential social needs of working people.

Politicians, corporations and the media will invariably dismiss such demands as “unrealistic” as there is no money. However, trillions of dollars in socially-produced wealth have been amassed in private hands—the fortunes of the billionaires have doubled in the pandemic—and billions are being spent on war preparations. The pressing social needs of the majority can and must be addressed by placing the banks, insurance companies, property developers and other corporate giants under working class ownership and democratic control.

The floods crisis, like the bushfire catastrophe and the COVID pandemic, demonstrates the need for the total reorganisation of society on a socialist basis so that it is planned rationally and democratically to protect health and lives, and meet social need.

The formation of independent rank-and-file committees is the basis for a political fight for a workers' government to implement the necessary socialist measures. This means joining and building the Socialist Equality Party to provide the socialist and internationalist perspective to lead that struggle.



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A socialist perspective