

“Everything is for profit, everywhere”

Anger developing in flood-devastated Australian regional city

Our reporters
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Two weeks after a flood engulfed them, frustration and anger are rising among residents in the northern New South Wales regional city of Lismore. Many have lost nearly everything. They face immense financial stress and homelessness, but have been left by governments to fend for themselves.

Lismore, with a population of 44,000, and many working-class and poorer people living in low-lying areas, has become a microcosm of the wealth inequality and social crisis that is worsening across the country, intensified by climate-related catastrophes and the COVID-19 disaster created by the profit-driven “live with the virus” policy of governments.

Last Sunday, as a WSWs reporting team was speaking to flood victims still trying to clear out their wrecked homes, Prime Minister Scott Morrison made plain the refusal of governments at every level to even rescue people from such disasters, let alone help them recover and rebuild their lives.

Asked on national television why people had been forced to rely on community members who arrived in boats, kayaks and jet skis, saving hundreds of lives, Morrison flatly defended the government failure. Governments could not just “turn off and on” emergency resources around the country, he insisted.

“We need people to go and rescue their neighbours. We need the community response,” Morrison said. In fact, he had “a lot of sympathy” for the view that governments had “overreached” and had told people that governments “could do too much for them.”

In severely-damaged South Lismore, **Brett**, a former Brisbane City Council worker, told the WSWs team: “We’re the ones who get hit all the time. The wealthy are doing quite fine. There’s no money for ordinary people. It’s always been the same, but it’s getting worse.

“How much have they sent to the war, to kill people? Rich people playing war games! It’s the Labor Party as well; it’s all of them. Everything is for profit, everywhere.”

Brett described what happened when the floodwaters hit. “I woke up at 5 in the morning and the water was on my steps. Within the hour it was in my house, and it came up to my chest. I waited for a rescue. I’ve lost everything; it’s all gone. I had no warning this was going to happen.

“Ordinary people came along and picked us up. No SES [Special Emergency Service]. I’ve never seen them. A lot of people would have perished except for ordinary people. The old people in the house next door are in their 80s, so we told the boat people to get them out first.”

Brett said the situation was “unbelievable. A lot of people have lost a lot of things.” Like most others in the low-lying neighbourhoods, he could not afford the flood coverage premiums demanded by the corporate insurance giants. “I’m only a disability pensioner. I heard that premiums were around \$13,000 a year.”

Brett was helping his neighbour Tammy, whom we also interviewed. He was running a generator to provide power for a high-pressure gurney to strip away the mud on her house. He said everyone was depending on neighbours, friends and volunteers.

“The council won’t go into your yard to pick up the wreckage, so we asked a bloke with a backhoe to pull it all out. He was just a private bloke, going around all the houses, with his wife, asking people if they needed help to pull things out.”

Unable to live in his house, Brett was staying with his sister. “No one has come round to say whether I can move back in, or if the house is condemned. It’s going to take a couple of years to get back to normal.”

He was scathing of the small amounts of financial aid being offered by the federal and state governments. Referring to federal grants, Brett said: “\$3,000 is not going to help much if I have to strip the walls and I’m left with a gutted house.”

Commenting on the deployment of more than 100 police to protect Morrison from protests when he visited Lismore

briefly last Thursday, Brett said: “That’s pretty sad. It’s a bit of a joke. The police were protecting one man, when they could have been helping elsewhere.”

Asked who was to blame for the disaster, Brett said: “It’s up to the government, isn’t it? I blame the local government and the parliament—Morrison and his crew. They’re the ones who control the rivers and the levee banks, and we have to pay for it.”

While we were talking to Brett and Tammy, a volunteer, **Jordan** arrived with a gurney. Like him, hundreds of people had come from far and wide to help—a stark contrast to the official indifference.

Jordan explained: “I’m part of a team from the Sunshine Coast, which has brought in resources, including tools, fuel, medical supplies and baby items. People are willing to do whatever they can to lift the suffering.”

Asked why people had to step in where governments are not, Jordan replied: “Unfortunately, it begs the question: Why can unskilled, unpaid volunteers coordinate at a much faster pace and have a more rapid response than those that are in a position to and are paid to do this type of thing?”

Young people are particularly affected, many having lost their jobs as well as their personal possessions. In central Lismore, **Kevin**, 19, said he had been working as a casual at a McDonald’s outlet, which was ruined by the flood and is now closed.

“We saw the water coming up at Maccas,” he said. “It was much higher than we were warned. The water came up to the top of the 12-foot Maccas sign.”

Kevin described the personal impact. “It’s pretty bad to see everything you own and you don’t really have any income to get anything back. All the sentimental stuff you can’t get back. Now I’m just trying to survive.”

Kevin’s mother **Tania** said eight feet of water had come through the top floor of their house. “We have lost absolutely everything. All our belongings. It is hitting us now. It’s very hard and emotional.”

Adding to the trauma was the death of a “poor lady” in their street, whose body was found by a volunteer, and hearing another man screaming for help as he was sucked down a drain. “There are so many heart-breaking stories,” Tania said.

She commented on the difference between the “overwhelming support” from ordinary people, and the fleeting visit by Morrison. “I thought, that was a quick visit! Did he actually come in and visit people and hear their stories? No, he was up at the council chambers, nice and safe.”

Matt, a young council worker next door, commented: “A lot of people feel abandoned. The emergency declaration took a week and a half.” He and his partner were now living

with his parents. “We’re not insured for flood,” he explained. “It’s not affordable. It’s like that across most of Lismore. Five years ago, we were quoted eight grand and I’ve heard people say it’s now up to \$30,000, on top of the standard coverage.”

In another street, Jamie and his landlord Warwick were clearing out the rented house. **Jamie**, a young IT worker, said he was now living in a tent in someone’s backyard. “We are basically living on the toes of a very generous family.” He said he had no idea how long that would be for.

A neighbour who had a kayak rescued Jamie, his partner and his elderly mother-in-law. Jamie denounced the government’s reliance on volunteers, who outnumbered the paid SES staff “by 20 to one.” He commented: “I don’t really have any faith in the governments.”

Jamie and Warwick rebuked the government figures, such as former Liberal-National politician Shane Stone, the Coordinator-General of the Morrison government’s National Recovery and Resilience Agency, who blamed people for living near rivers and forests, saying they had to expect floods and bushfires. “Nobody chooses to live in a flood plain,” Jamie said, pointing to the cost of housing.

Jamie was insured for home contents but was still fighting an insurance company, which was demanding original documents and serial numbers, “which we no longer have.”

Warwick condemned the delay in emergency services. “We pay rates and taxes. Why can’t you help us out? Why did it take so long to get here?” He was also “flabbergasted” by the lack of financial aid, after governments had paid out so many billions of dollars to big business during the COVID pandemic. “These people live in another world,” he said.

Lismore is the epicentre of a wider flood disaster. There are similar scenes, and seething anger, in towns and villages throughout the Northern Rivers region of NSW, including Ballina, Murwillumbah, Mullumbimby, Coraki, Woodburn, Broadwater, Nimbin and Billinudgel, as well as in the flood-hit streets of Sydney, Brisbane and southeast Queensland.



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