

Australian flood victims in northwest Sydney reveal extent of the devastation

Our reporters
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Large areas of the Australian east coast were devastated by severe flooding over the past fortnight. Beginning in Queensland and northern New South Wales (NSW), the torrential rains continued down the coast hitting areas of Sydney, Australia's most populous city.

The WSWS spoke to residents in suburbs of northwest Sydney. For many this was their third year in a row in which such flooding occurred. With each year getting progressively worse, the latest inundation was record-breaking. Residents were left on their own, with little warning and next to no government assistance as the flood waters rapidly rose.

The flooding continues in parts of far western NSW. Broken Hill has had record rainfall and flash flooding which has claimed another victim, bringing the total death count for NSW and Queensland to 23. More than 5000 homes have been deemed unlivable as the true extent of the damage continues to be revealed.

Noah, a 19-year-old childcare worker studying to be a primary school teacher, and his brother **Thomas**, 20-year-old landscaper, spoke to the WSWS. They live with their two other brothers, mother, and father in northwest Sydney near the Hawkesbury River.

Noah said: "Last year the first floods hit and then we got hit with COVID. I was a plumber at the time and was not working, mum is in childcare and wasn't working either. We weren't prepared. My brother woke up at ten o'clock and stepped in ankle deep water. We lost a lot of furniture and the whole of downstairs was messed up. We had to refurbish the whole thing. This year we got everything out from downstairs and we were safe."

Thomas added: "We weren't expecting it to come upstairs. We lost power for six days. The wires run through the downstairs roof and because the water came upstairs through the floorboards all the insulation got wet. We have to re-wire half the house basically."

Noah explained: "We've lost AC, heating, Wi-Fi, we didn't have hot water for a couple of days. By the time we realised we needed to get furniture out from upstairs the water was hip deep."

Thomas described evacuating the house: "On Tuesday [March 8] night I had water coming in through the doors of my four-wheel drive up to the pedals. We had to swim the dogs out to the car, put stuff on our shoulders and we got out by 9 p.m. When we came back the next morning you could kayak through the house. We were more prepared this year, but it was still not enough.

"There were a lot of Facebook posts predicting it would rise to 14 metres compared to 11 metres last year, so we raised everything up. We got text messages to get prepared to evacuate. When we were packing up to leave everyone in the street came together and helped each other. We didn't have SES [State Emergency Service], or firefighters to help, it was only after in the clean-up they came," he stated.

Noah added: "Flood insurance for our house is \$30,000 a year because we are in a high flood risk zone. We can't afford that. I would love to have the money to fix up all this and help my mother out, but I've got to fix my own room, same with my brothers. I know there are people who have it worse, who don't even have houses. It's got to change."

Thomas said, "It doesn't matter how much money they give to businesses if one of them has something go wrong it is the emergency services that would do something about it. My mum runs a family day care from home, if emergency services were supported and we got more warning she could go back to work next week. But she can't open yet, we're looking at two to three weeks. Everyone else in the family has to go back to work because we can't afford not to, but that means the clean-up process is slower.

"I got \$1,000 as a relief payment to replace my

mattress, bed, all my cabinets, paint the walls, that's the money gone. There's also damage to my car. I could say I'm lucky because it's just my furniture, but my old man has to rewire the whole of downstairs, replace the walls, fix the ceiling, that's easily well above \$1,000.

"I have a yard to store my landscaping materials, but one of our neighbours had all his stuff in the basement downstairs, which had waist deep water in it. Now he must replace them, but he can't charge the client double, he has to lose money on the next few jobs till he gets himself back up," he said.

Noah asked: "What's to say next year's flood won't be worse than this year's? So, do we re-do the house, or do we wait? This is a great place to live but if you have to deal with this every year then do we leave, or do we try to make the house more flood-proof? But there's not much more we can do unless we put our house on floaties. The only time we've had floods like this was last year and this year."

Noah's mother pointed out that even with the flood danger her sons are priced out of the area. One two story house on the street is valued at close to \$2 million because it comes with 5 acres, which are now under water.

When asked about the war in Ukraine, Noah noted that the conflict and sweeping Western sanctions against Russia were sending gas prices up worldwide, compounding a social crisis facing working people.

"It does open your eyes when you see how slow SES came out to help us compared to how quickly the government sent massive military aid to help a whole other country," he said. "People don't want a war, but no one listens. I just want it to stop. Russia isn't the best place to live in right now, nor is Ukraine, and we're not the best place either."

Blake, a Windsor resident and builder, said: "We've been here three years and each of those years it has flooded. We're always worse off. The first year it came into the backyard, the second year it came into the house, this year it came 1.4 metres into the house.

"We've lost our kitchen, wardrobes, everything. We've got fans trying to dry the walls out. That will take three to four weeks. Then we'll have to get an assessor in to check the moisture in the walls. Then we'll be allowed to start rebuilding the kitchen, the wardrobes, and the cupboards. We'll be out of our home for three to four months.

"I think this will be our last year here. If we do all that renovation and it floods again in six months, I don't want to go through that. I don't want to sell, it's my dream

house, but I couldn't deal with the heartbreak of another flood," he said.

"I'd still like to see more action on the Warragamba dam. They were letting out water for about three to four weeks before the flood but that was already too late. They should've started in summer when it was at 70 per cent full. We knew we were having an El Nina weather event, which always means heavy rainfall. Instead, they waited until it was 95 percent full. They only had to look at what happened last year to see what would happen if they kept the dam as high as they did," he said.

Patrick, a 23-year-old refrigeration, air conditioning and electrical worker, bought his house in Windsor in early 2021, just two months before it was badly damaged in last year's flood. He said: "My uncle's property is at the same height. He's lived there 25 years and he told me before I moved in, 'I've never seen a flood in my life.' On that advice, I bought it.

"Maybe it is a one-in-100-year event, but they've been holding the Warragamba Dam at 98 percent full. Why? We've never run out of water, even in a ten-year drought.

"The flood came up higher than last year. I didn't think it was going to come up as high because there was less communication about what was going to happen. I didn't get a text message warning me to evacuate. You just end up having to watch the water and react.

"The flood ruined all the cabinetry in the kitchen, all the built-in wardrobes, the laundry, sections of gyprock, and two of the doors. The \$1,000 from the government might pay for one wardrobe. I don't have flood insurance. They put the premiums up—they wanted \$14,900 this year."

Patrick noted that the unaffordable price of insurance came on top of the rapidly rising cost of living. "Fuel prices are going through the roof, everything is going through the roof, and it's only going to get worse with this war. In a couple of years no-one will be able to afford to live."



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