

# Australian state premier offers pittance to flood victims

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New South Wales (NSW) Premier Dominic Perrottet travelled to the regional city of Lismore yesterday to belatedly announce grants for people who have lost their homes in two record floods throughout the state's northeast and around Sydney over the past five weeks.

It was a desperate bid to head off white-hot anger in working-class communities across northern NSW and around the country over the refusal of governments to protect and aid devastated residents.

But the amounts offered by the right-wing Liberal-National Coalition state premier are far too small to make any real difference to the thousands of people who are now homeless, living in cars, tents, couch-surfing, or cramped in small campervans.

Lismore, the epicentre of the floods disaster, has become the sharpest expression of a wider and deeper social crisis of poverty and inequality, which has been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and repeated climate change-related catastrophes, like the bushfires and floods.

Having failed to even organise rescue and emergency services as floods engulfed entire communities, the federal and state governments have essentially abandoned the victims, as they did in the 2019–20 bushfires.

More than five weeks after the first flood wave hit on February 28, Perrottet claimed his government would review eligibility requirements for disaster relief payments and said a new \$112 million support package would include “up to” \$20,000 for households whose homes had been declared destroyed or uninhabitable.

For tenants, the offering was even smaller—up to \$5,000 to replace goods—while landlords could claim up to \$15,000 for repairs. The funds would be available only to owners or renters who were not insured and have not claimed Disaster Relief Grants.

These pittances would barely cover the repair of one room, let alone an entire house or flat. The \$112 million stands in stark contrast to the hundreds of billions of dollars being poured into the military for war preparations, featuring long-range missiles and submarines.

Nor is there any guarantee that the cash promises will be kept. Reportedly, more than 9,000 people have applied for NSW flood relief payments over the past month, but less than 550 people have actually been paid.

Significantly, Perrottet used the occasion to distance himself from the unravelling and detested federal government of his close colleague, Prime Minister Scott Morrison. Perrottet claimed that he had been waiting for the Morrison government to help fund the support package, but had decided to go it alone.

Just as significantly, during his visit to Lismore, Perrottet was flanked by the local state Labor MP Janelle Saffin. She expressed appreciation for the package, as did the state Labor leader Chris Minns. This underscores the essential unity between the two ruling parties and their mutual fear of unrest getting out of control.

Saffin praised the grants, but said they could have been up to \$50,000 if the federal government had chipped in. “I do want the federal government to step up, it's a bit too slow, I'll leave it at that,” Saffin told reporters. “But I welcome the (\$20,000) today and I said to the premier that that is a good start.”

Residents were not impressed. A South Lismore flood victim, currently housed in a campervan with poor facilities at nearby Alstonville Showground, told the WSWs that Perrottet's offer would make virtually no difference to those who had lost their homes in the floods.

“They might get their bathroom fixed, if that!” she said. “It won't do much at all.” Even if the grants were \$50,000, as proposed by Saffin, it would not be enough. The problem lay deeper, she commented.

She was still trying to obtain the previous assistance promised by governments. “We are taking a group up to the community hub today to try to get onto Service NSW. Its online process is too hard to navigate, and I'm quite tech savvy! I applied for a grant weeks ago, and have received nothing.”

For housing until her home could be repaired—which could be more than a year—the state government had just asked her

if she would accept a demountable house in a mobile village somewhere of its choosing, even in neighbouring Queensland. “It could be anywhere!” she said.

She reiterated that many residents had no flood insurance because of the exorbitant premiums charged by the insurance giants. One of her friends was paying \$100 a week for house insurance and even then the terms and conditions were tricky as to what the policy covered.

Another Lismore resident, Lauren De Groot, a single mother with a three-year-old daughter, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that thousands of people were now homeless, but homelessness had been serious throughout the region even before the disasters.

“We have nowhere to go, we have none of our possessions and we aren’t getting anything from the government—all of these promises that aren’t been followed through on.”

Her rented flat had been inundated on February 28. Like many others, she was rescued only hours later by a friend with a boat. The caravan in which she currently lives was lent to her by a friend for just six months, and she had to pay for it to be parked at a caravan park in Ballina, another flood-struck city.

It was the second time she and her daughter had been made homeless, having lost a previous home in the bushfires. “We were homeless for three months after the fire... I finally managed to get someone to give me a chance in a rental where I was paying a ridiculous rate of rent that left me on the poverty line.”

Another Lismore resident, Isaac Campbell, whose home flooded twice, told the *Australian* he was still waiting for support he applied for weeks ago. “Unless we get some money and some help pretty soon, this is just bad. It’s a Third World situation here—there’s raw sewage in the river and no one has power, hot water or a fridge.”

Labor politicians have tried to focus all the blame on Morrison, accusing him of allocating funds preferentially to Coalition-held electorates. That charge has been echoed by a local state Liberal MP, Catherine Cusack, who declared today she would not vote for the Coalition in the looming federal election.

This is a political diversion. In the first instance, the \$3,000 federal income support grants, which were eventually extended to most flood-affected areas, are themselves chicken feed compared to the losses that residents have suffered.

More fundamentally, the disaster has laid bare the policy of all capitalist governments—whether Coalition or Labor. It is to leave ordinary working people to fend for themselves in the face of these catastrophes, including the worsening Omicron wave that is sweeping through schools, hospitals and households.

Morrison simply put it most crudely when he told a media conference in Lismore on March 8 that people had to be “realistic.” He contemptuously declared: “In any natural disaster, we don’t have those resources that are just waiting around the corner.”

The following day, with Labor’s support, Morrison unveiled the largest increase to the size of the Australian military since the Vietnam War, at a cost of \$38 billion. The purpose is to prepare to play a frontline role in the US-led conflicts with Russia and China, aimed at ensuring the global hegemony of American imperialism and shoring up the strategic interests of Australian capitalism.

The concept that the situation will change if a federal Labor government is elected is an illusion. There are no real differences between the policy of Labor, the Coalition or any of the political elites who populate parliament.

The residents of northern NSW and southern Queensland have been left to fend for themselves and rely on the support of ordinary people. That needs to be consciously organised into rank-and-file neighbourhood and safety committees that are independent of these political parties and the trade unions, which have lifted not a finger to assist, in order to advance an alternative to the dictates of the corporate elite.

As the Socialist Equality Party said in its March 6 statement, “Australia’s floods: An indictment of capitalism”: “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.”

In that statement we outlined a socialist policy, which would include:

- 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.



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