

Anger continues to seethe over government abandonment of Australian flood victims

Mike Head
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Residents of Lismore and other cities, towns and villages across the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales (NSW) are furious over being left by governments to live in ruins and rubbish after being engulfed by two devastating floods on February 28 and March 30.

Weeks after the floods, Lismore, a rural city of 44,000, including many working class and poor people, resembles a war zone, with piles of stinking and hazardous debris still strewn on residential streets.

Together with other flood-struck communities throughout the Northern Rivers, Lismore has become an acute example of a wider and deeper social crisis across Australia. Poverty and inequality have been intensified by repeated climate change-related catastrophes, like bushfires and floods, as well as the soaring cost of living and the unchecked COVID-19 pandemic.

Having failed to even organise rescue and emergency services as surging floodwaters threatened the lives of thousands of people, the federal, state and local governments have largely abandoned the victims, as they did in the 2019–20 bushfires in eastern Australia.

In another cynical attempt to defuse the anger, which is shared by ordinary people across the country, the federal Liberal-National Coalition government last week said it would “top up” the pitiful “disaster recovery allowance,” which is paid at the JobSeeker (dole) rate of \$642.70 a fortnight to those temporarily unable to earn an income.

The \$350-a-week “top up” is totally inadequate and lasts only a maximum of 13 weeks. Furthermore, it is confined to those living in the Lismore local government area, which happens to be in an electorate that the government is desperately trying to retain at the May 21 federal election. Flood victims in nearby

communities, including Ballina, Murwillumbah, Mullumbimby and the Tweed Heads area, are excluded.

This latest political ploy came two weeks after the NSW Liberal-National Premier Dominic Perrottet tried to hose down the public hostility by announcing that residents who were not insured and had not accessed other grants could apply for aid of up to \$20,000 to repair their homes. For tenants, the pittance was even smaller—up to \$5,000 to replace lost household essentials.

One resident, whose house was inundated in the February 28 flood, causing extensive damage and loss of all household items, gave this comment to the WSWs:

“I’ve sent you photos I’ve taken of the mess we’re still living in, six weeks after the first flood! Included in these photos is one of asbestos lying in the rubble. The stench is disgusting. It smells like sewage. The debris is mixed in with the putrid smell of mud. It’s got to be a health risk.

“People throughout the region are facing homelessness on a much higher level. We don’t get accurate information as to the number of people whose homes have been declared ‘uninhabitable’ but the most recent figure I could find was 3,800. However, after the second flood that number could easily double.

“I’ve looked into the \$20,000 grant and it’s rubbish—the paperwork you have to produce, the amount of time you have to wait will stretch into months, possibly even next year at the rate they’re cutting Service NSW staff.

“People need financial assistance now. We need a housing plan to accommodate those who’ve lost their property or can’t return for an extended period due to the extent of the damage from the floods.

“Our state Labor MP Janelle Saffin has thanked

Perrottett, saying only the federal government should step up! This is (a) a pittance of what people need and (b) many will not be eligible because they don't have enough of the paperwork required, or they don't have access to the internet (another issue not resolved).

"The application process is long and confusing and there's no timeframe around when those eligible will receive any funds. We can't help wonder if this is about attacking the poor and most vulnerable in this region. We're all feeling like these governments want us dead!

"This is no exaggeration. Lismore resembles a war zone. The mainstream media, while not reporting the truth about the disaster, have painted the region as being a 'flood zone' and the community as being responsible for building houses knowing they will be affected by floods.

"This is a huge lie covering up the fact that the 'rain bomb' on February 28 sent the river more than 2 metres higher than the highest recorded flood in 1974. That led to houses and towns being affected that had never been flooded previously.

"Three levels of government have completely ignored our plight and the mainstream media is, for the most part, staying silent about the reality here in the Northern Rivers!

"The cost of living has blown us out financially as well. If you're fortunate enough to have a car, the cost of fuel currently has made it near impossible to afford to fill up, hoping what's in your tank will last just one more trip."

It is an illusion to think that the situation will change if a federal Labor government is elected on May 21. It is equally committed to meeting the requirements of big business.

Every aspect of the floods crisis—from the lack of action on climate change to the inadequacy of basic infrastructure and support services—is the direct result of the subordination of society to the requirements of corporate profit.

In our election statement, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns that climate change is the basic driver of new extremes in temperature and climatic instability. "Yet for decades, governments have fiddled with patently inadequate policies and market-based measures, while the planet has baked."

As part of our socialist action program for the

working class, the SEP proposes:

Establish a fully funded and staffed national disaster agency to take the necessary steps to prepare for floods and fires, prevent them if possible, and respond immediately if need be. Full income support for those impacted and adequate financial assistance to help them reconstruct their lives.

As we explain, the financial press, corporate CEOs and their political servants will object that our demands are "unaffordable," but the working class, the source of all wealth in society, must decide what is affordable and what is not.

Such ruling class objections point to the necessity to nationalise the banks, finance houses, insurance giants and major corporations, and place production and distribution under democratic workers' control. A national public insurance fund would compensate individual losses and provide for the reconstruction and rebuilding of communities.

Under the capitalist profit system, the flood victims have been left to fend for themselves. They have had to rely on the support of ordinary people. That response needs to be consciously organised into rank-and-file neighbourhood committees, independent of the political establishment, in order to advance an alternative to the dictates of the financial elite.

Such working-class organisations need to become the foundation for a workers' government to reorganise society along socialist lines as part of the fight for socialism internationally.

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