

SEP (Australia) campaign raises political issues in flood-devastated Lismore

Our correspondent
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A Socialist Equality Party (SEP) team from Brisbane took the party's campaign in the May 21 federal election to the flood-shattered regional city of Lismore in northern New South Wales last Saturday.

Governments left Lismore residents to rescue and then to fend for themselves after being engulfed by two floods on February 28 and March 30. This is one of the sharpest expressions of the widening social gulf in Australia between the wealthy corporate elites and the working people who they treat with contempt.

Nearly two months on from the twin disasters, SEP campaigners found simmering anger and political discontent. The downtown shopping district now largely consists of closed or boarded-up stores, and many of the homes in the surrounding residential streets are still uninhabitable.

Despite federal and state government promises of limited financial aid and temporary accommodation, many flood victims from the low-lying parts of the city are continuing to be housed in poor conditions. Some are in caravans or motor homes, others are living with friends or relatives, and some are camping in their damaged homes, sometimes without proper electricity or water services.

There is widespread uncertainty over the future, with no protection organised against further likely floods.

To add to the political disaffection, Lismore residents are having difficulty exercising their democratic right to vote in Saturday's federal election.

Only one pre-polling station was open last week, at the Southern Cross University campus, where it was down two flights of stairs, and had no wheelchair access. On Saturday, another station belatedly opened, but in the deserted downtown district. The electoral commission was yet to announce the polling booths for May 21. Postal voting is problematic because so many people are living in temporary locations.

Tammy, whose home in South Lismore was destroyed, explained why she decided to distribute copies of the SEP's election statement around the streets where she is now living in a small one-bedroom rental unit in Byron Bay, about 50 kilometres from Lismore.

"I used to vote Labor, which was whom my family voted for, and we were not educated enough on how to vote. It took me a long time to realise that no matter if I voted for somebody else, essentially that vote was going to the big parties any way..."

"By putting out your flyers, people can have a different choice. All the big party flyers in the letterbox, they go in the yellow bin. But if I get the SEP statement out, people around here will actually have a read because we have a lot of different people here, from everywhere, who think outside the box."

Tammy congratulated the SEP for getting on the ballot, despite being deregistered. That was so important because "Albanese and Morrison is not a choice." Both stood for the interests of the wealthy.

"I am one of the lucky ones from the floods. There are so many people worse off... We got 28 days in motor homes, and then another 28 days, but it's only one month. We were worrying what was going to happen to us, and then officials came around knocking on the doors and giving us 14 days' notice, and people had nowhere to go..."

"There's so many people who got eviction notices because their house can't be lived in. The real estate agents have no duty of care to that person to find them another place, and there aren't any places anyway, unless you go out of the area."

Tammy explained that many people had difficulty filling in the online forms for flood relief, especially if all they had was an old mobile phone. And then the money being offered by charities ran out.

"The money that the government is giving is not enough, even for the homeowners to fix one room in their

place. It's a bit of a kick in the guts when you see on the news that the governments are putting all this money into war, when we have a war zone right here."

Referring to the US and Australian threats to Solomon Islands for signing a security agreement with China, Tammy asked: "Do we side with the US because we are scared of them or because we just know that they have the power? It's like us picking the 'lesser of evils' in the election, with all the countries they bully... They just want control of everything."

Asked about the way all the other parties were burying all mention of the COVID-19 pandemic, Tammy commented: "They keep saying it's just like the common flu that you just have to deal with; keep getting boosters. We might have a variant that wipes us all out, but they're just saying let it go through and we'll see who's left!"

Debra, a member of the indigenous "stolen generation" of children who were taken from their families, spoke with us at the shopping centre at Goonellabah, a higher-elevated eastern suburb of Lismore.

"Life is becoming more and more difficult for working-class families, because their wages aren't rising, but they are having to pay more rent, higher food and petrol costs. Everything costs a lot in Australia..."

"My son works double shifts, just to survive. \$550 a week rent with five kids. He battles every day and he is doing double-time, in Melbourne."

Labor and the Coalition were no choice, Debra said. "They're for the rich. The rich are getting richer and the poor get the picture, as Midnight Oil said. What do they do with all that money? We shouldn't have starving people, homeless people, any of things, with the amount of money in the world..."

"The flood victims are screaming for help. Why aren't governments listening? It's OK for politicians to come here and visit, and go to the council, and say they feel for you and then leave. In Lismore, they have to do something."

The interview was interrupted twice by people coming up to voice support for Julian Assange, the WikiLeaks founder incarcerated in London and facing extradition to the US. One, a male nurse, said: "The government is not doing anything. Assange should be out. All those sexual allegations were a just a set-up to bring him down. We need to fight hard."

Debra commented: "It's very sad. It's absolutely disgusting. That's what you get for speaking up! What's Labor doing to get him out? Nothing. It's being brushed under the carpet, like a lot of other things... And war is

going on everywhere again. It's all a command game."

Debra drew a parallel to the treatment of Aboriginal people, and the lack of any real change since the last Labor government issued a parliamentary apology for the removal of children from their families. "They said sorry in Canberra but all the recommendations they came up with are nothing. It's easy to say sorry."

The SEP's election statement addresses the social disaster created by this year's catastrophic flooding in Lismore and other areas and indicts state and federal governments for failing to take preventative action, seriously tackle climate change or provide the necessary assistance to the victims.

The government response to the floods underscores the need for the socialist program of action advanced by the SEP's statement. Our demands include:

"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."

Such demands are incompatible with the current capitalist order, which is increasingly subordinating lives, health and livelihoods to corporate profit and billionaire wealth accumulation.

Our demands unavoidably raise the issue of which class is to hold the reins of power. A workers' government has to be established to reorganise society along socialist lines as part of the fight for socialism internationally.

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