

Ten years after the Queensland floods in Australia: What has changed?

Michael Newman
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Over ten years ago, the months of November 2010 to January 2011 saw the Australian state of Queensland suffer its worst flooding since 1974, generated by what was, at the time, the state's highest average rainfall on record.

Low-lying suburbs of Brisbane, the state capital, and over a hundred communities were devastated by the floods, resulting in the deaths of 33 people, and more than 200,000 residents were displaced.

What also made this catastrophe significant, as partly revealed in the final report released by the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry (QFCI) in 2012, was the lack of warnings given or preparations made by the then state Labor government, under Premier Anna Bligh, which could have significantly reduced the losses of life and property.

Now, in the wake of even more widespread and destructive floods two months ago, answers must be demanded. Why, despite the damning evidence from the 2011 floods, have tens of thousands of people in both Queensland and neighbouring New South Wales (NSW) again lost their homes and livelihoods? And why have communities that were deluged ten years ago been impacted again?

As in 2011, the worst-affected residents are in low-lying working-class areas where many people have moved because of sky-rocketing property prices and rents, often not being told of the flood risks by real estate agents and landlords.

Based on the testimonies of 345 witnesses, the QFCI's final report acknowledged that government authorities were fully aware that the deluged areas were susceptible to flooding disasters, well before 2011, and measures could have been taken to reduce the carnage that resulted.

But like the interim report released by the QFCI in

August 2011, the final report obscured how that devastation was made possible by the actions of both the federal and Queensland governments. That included permitting development in flood-prone areas, a lack of funding for emergency services and disaster management, and a dysfunctional coordination of rescue efforts, with no single agency in charge, as a Flood Risk Management audit had warned in September 2010.

Shortly after the final report's release, residents of the severely-damaged Lockyer Valley region west of Brisbane accused the QFCI of failing to answer critical questions, such as why no prior warning was given before affected areas were impacted. Yet that breakdown was repeated this year when residents in many places, including the regional city of Lismore in northern NSW, were only alerted to evacuate after floodwaters had already hit, and were left to rescue each other.

Some of the report's conclusions were found later to have contradicted evidence given by witnesses to the QFCI, including how the collapse of a quarry wall in the town of Grantham, west of Brisbane, had contributed to the deaths of 12 people. The final report had insisted that the wall's collapse had made no difference.

On the subject of insurance, the report found that most companies offered no protection against flood damage, and those that did had varying definitions of it. Many policy holders were unaware that flood damage was excluded from their cover.

Despite the supposed introduction of a national standard in June 2012, no answer was given to the financial elite's domination of the insurance industry. As a result, over the past decade corporate insurers have driven up premiums beyond the means of working-

class families. Many residents who lost their homes in the 2022 floods were not insured when their properties were inundated.

Despite a commitment by the Bligh Labor government to implement the findings of the flood commission, many remain unfulfilled. These include a recommendation to construct a flood levee around Brisbane's central business district, despite this being raised again in a 2017 report on disaster resilience by Arcadis, a design and consultancy firm.

Since taking office in 2015, the current state Labor government of Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk has also not proceeded with critical upgrades to the Wivenhoe Dam, west of Brisbane, including a proposed \$900 million expansion. That is despite the dam overflowing in 2011 and not meeting national safety standards since 2002. A major upgrade to the North Pine Dam, north of Brisbane, is still under consideration by the state government's SEQWater, despite warnings from a dam safety expert to the inquiry in 2011.

Ongoing cuts to emergency services, well before this year's floods, also left these largely volunteer agencies unprepared to effectively respond. In 2019, a state parliament budget estimate hearing revealed that 19 branches of the Queensland State Emergency Service (SES), including eight in the town of Mackay, had closed since November 2015, and at least 900 volunteers had resigned in the previous three years.

Furthermore, despite being proposed as early as 2004, a national warning system, which would have introduced common classifications for natural disasters across all states and territories, has not been introduced. It was again recommended last year by a royal commission inquiry into the 2019–20 bushfires calamity.

Overall, nothing has improved since the 2011 floods. The response is dominated by the continued prioritisation of capitalist profit interests over the need to address underlying climate change, along with the neglect of victims of natural disasters, and repeated cover-ups of government and business responsibility.

Like the \$5.6 billion "flood relief" package created by the federal Gillard Labor government in 2011, paid for by a \$1.8 billion flood levy imposed upon the working class and \$3.8 billion of cuts to social services, similar packages for this year's floods have been earmarked primarily for businesses.

As the Socialist Equality Party said this year in its March 6 statement "Australia's floods: An indictment of capitalism":

The floods that have shattered communities across large areas of Australia's eastern states over the past week have further demonstrated the indifference of governments—Coalition and Labor—for the health, lives and livelihoods of ordinary working people.

Coming on top of the 2019–20 bushfire catastrophe and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the floods have further laid bare their failure to take the necessary steps to protect the population from such disasters.

That statement outlined a series of urgently-needed measures to address the increasing climate-related disasters and explained that they demonstrated "the need for the total reorganisation of society on a socialist basis so that it is planned rationally and democratically to protect health and lives, and meet social need."

The statement called for the formation of independent rank-and-file committees in workplaces and working-class areas and neighbourhoods, independent of the pro-capitalist parties and trade unions, as the basis for a political fight for a workers' government to implement the necessary socialist measures.



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