

Thousands of Australian flood victims still denied government aid

Mike Head
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More than three months on from the first of two floods that engulfed large parts of the regional city of Lismore, the surrounding Northern Rivers region of New South Wales (NSW) and outer areas of Sydney, thousands of residents remain effectively homeless and thousands more have been blocked from flood recovery grants.

Following the flood disasters of February 28 and March 30, in which many people had to rely on local volunteers to be rescued, the state and federal governments belatedly and grudgingly promised various aid packages, mostly for businesses, to seek to head off widespread outrage over the lack of government rescue and recovery assistance.

Yet less than a third of applications for help have been approved so far, and many more have been rejected, producing growing discontent in Lismore and elsewhere over the contemptuous official response.

The NSW Liberal-National Coalition government, backed by the Labor Party parliamentary opposition, announced four different grant programs for devastated households and businesses. More than 43,000 applications have been made across those programs, but only 27 percent have been approved, while 50 percent have been declined.

Even worse, the government's Resilience NSW agency, which was nowhere to be seen during the floods, has approved only about 330 Disaster Relief Grants from more than 2,440 applications. Likewise, the Rural Assistance Authority, which is meant to aid primary producers, has processed a little under half of the 3,200 grant applications it has received, and approved about 1,100.

Premier Dominic Perrottet's NSW government has flatly defended this record, saying it has more than 200 people working to process grant applications. "To put that in perspective for people, it's more than four times the number of grant applications that we had resulting from the Black Summer fires," Flood Recovery Minister Steph

Cooke said.

However, there have been similar outcomes from the 2019–20 bushfire catastrophe, with victims still homeless or struggling to rebuild more than two years on.

In a bid to cover its tracks, the government is now claiming that the delays and rejections for the flood grants are the result of fraudulent claims, even though these allegations apply to only a fraction of the applications.

Of the 43,000 applications, 2,705 are reportedly under review for possible fraud, and just 530 applications have been referred to the police for investigation. Many of these may be honest mistakes, given the complex and confusing application processes.

There is a similar pattern of delay and obstruction from insurance companies. More than 216,000 claims had been filed by the end of May, potentially costing \$4.3 billion. According to the Insurance Council of Australia, however, only about 20 percent of claims, totalling almost \$1 billion, have been paid.

During a brief hearing in Lismore last week by a parliamentary inquiry into the floods, people spoke about couch surfing, sleeping in vans or camping in houses with no walls or doors.

Marcus Bebb, formerly of South Lismore, explained that he and his family of five are living in a caravan in a showground after losing their home. A rebuild could take three years, and he was still waiting to hear the government's position on house buybacks.

Downtown Lismore still remains a disaster zone, with most shops boarded up, along with key educational and cultural institutions such as the city's library, art gallery, TAFE college and historical museum. Debris still litters some streets.

Due to the protracted failure of governments, both Coalition and Labor, to address the threat of climate change, the entire region is at increasing risk of extreme weather events such as floods and fires, with the dangers

greatest among its high proportion of working-class, vulnerable and poor residents.

The WSWWS discussed these and other political issues with residents last Saturday at the only shopping complex still open in Lismore, at Goonellabah. Many commented on the hundreds of extra people now homeless in the area and the difficulties residents were having in filling out the complex forms and providing all the documents needed to apply for government grants.

Glorz, a long-time resident, who is studying to be a teacher, commented: “People have been left to fend for themselves since the floods. It’s like governments want to get rid of them.”

Asked for her views on the May 21 federal election and the new Labor government, Glorz agreed that both the major parties stood for the interests of big business. “It’s a two-party system, and nobody else had a chance,” she said. “I reckon that the Australian people have been ripped off, the workers have been ripped off and the general citizens have been ripped off.

Asked about the Socialist Equality Party’s fight for a socialist alternative, she commented: “The whole system needs to be abolished, the current government and everything. They are just one body with lots of arms. All they are about is themselves. A new system needs to be for the people, and by the people.”

Glorz condemned the persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and had no confidence that the Labor government would do anything to free him. “That man stood up years ago and told us the truth and nobody wanted to believe what was going on. He has been jailed for telling the truth. He needs to be free, because men like him are leaders in free speech.”

In the context of the US-led war against Russia in Ukraine, she added: “And it’s a chain reaction to what’s actually going on now. If you think back to what he [Assange] was saying years ago, and exposing years ago, that is now coming true.

“He exposed America, and England and Australia for who they really are, and they don’t want that. They want him out of the picture completely. He has a hell of a lot more to expose, and they don’t want that... Free Julian Assange!”

Danny and **Sandra**, from the NSW south coast, were visiting friends in Lismore. They stopped to voice their support for Assange.

Danny explained: “He’s told the world the truth. He’s brought out the secrets and showed the world. He’s opened up what the world didn’t know about... If you tell

the truth in this country today, you are penalised for it. America is the problem and Australia is too far in bed with the Americans.”

Sandra added: “He was only doing his job as a journalist. He was holding up journalistic integrity, because he didn’t divulge his sources. It’s disgusting. There were never any charges against him.”

Danny interjected: “The people are starting to find out, and if they don’t stop there’s going to be a revolution. The people are sacrificing, with the price of living and everything else, but the governments don’t sacrifice.”

Sandra asked: “What’s the use of sending money to Ukraine, like billions of dollars, to kill people? So they’re warmongers.”

In its March 6 statement, “Australia’s floods: An indictment of capitalism,” the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) explained:

“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.”

The statement outlined a series of essential demands, including:

- 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.

These demands mean forming rank-and-file committees to fight for them, rejecting the dictates of the financial elite and advancing the struggle for a workers’ government to implement socialist measures.

As the statement explained: “The pressing social needs of the majority can and must be addressed by placing the banks, insurance companies, property developers and other corporate giants under working class ownership and democratic control.”



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