

Australia: Sydney again hit by devastating floods

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The east coast of Australia has been battered by heavy rainfall, floods and high winds over the past four days, damaging thousands of homes, forcing large-scale evacuations and leaving around 19,000 homes without power.

Parts of New South Wales (NSW) received three to four times their July rainfall average in just 24 hours, while winds of up to 100 kilometres per hour have lashed the state.

Sydney, the largest city in the country with a population of more than five million, has so far been the worst affected area. Most of the 102 evacuation orders that were in place this morning, covering around 50,000 people, were for outer suburbs of the city, particularly in the north west and south west.

Higher flood levels have been recorded than in March or April, largely as a result of months of sustained heavy rain throughout the region, which has left catchment areas saturated.

All major dams in the Sydney network were overflowing on Monday morning. The largest, Warragamba Dam, began spilling over in the early hours of Sunday morning, at a rate of more than 500 gigalitres per day, higher than in March or April.

The extreme weather hit first on the NSW South Coast, with more than 300 millimetres (11.8 inches) of rain recorded in the 24 hours to Sunday morning. The Bureau of Meteorology said yesterday it was investigating whether a set of wild weather events in the Illawarra region, just south of Sydney, in the early hours of Sunday morning were the result of a tornado. Forty homes were affected including some houses and an apartment block that had their roofs torn off.

Flood warnings remain in place for the Georges and Woronora rivers in southwest Sydney. Rising waters cut off major arterial roads and railways throughout the region and flooded homes in Chipping Norton,

Cabramatta and other low-lying areas, many of which have already endured floods this year.

In Camden, where residents had already been through three floods this year, houses and businesses were again inundated as more than 200 millimetres of rain fell over the weekend.

Major flooding continues in parts of the Nepean and Hawkesbury rivers on Sydney's northwestern fringes. The Hawkesbury reached 13.9 metres at Windsor this morning, the highest flood level recorded since 1978.

The Windsor Bridge, touted as "flood proof" when it was constructed in 2020 at a cost of \$101 million, and the Richmond Bridge were both closed yesterday, cutting off a number of suburbs on Sydney's northwest fringe.

This is the fourth major flood event to hit Sydney in 18 months and many residents are seeing their homes inundated again, even before they had finished cleaning up from the last disaster in April.

One Windsor resident told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that insurance assessors had only recently been in the area to look at damage from the last flood.

These people now confront the devastating prospect of yet again repairing their homes, with the growing fear that the next catastrophe may be only months away. This comes at enormous cost as insurance companies have refused to provide cover or have raised premiums tenfold in recent years.

Some have vowed not to return, but they are left with little choice. Successive governments, in line with the demands of property developers, have green-lit countless housing projects in flood-prone areas. Soaring house prices have forced working-class families to live in these low-lying areas.

This is compounded by rapidly rising inflation and declining real wages. Even as the current flood disaster develops, the Reserve Bank of Australia is expected to announce a further interest rate rise today, increasing the

already intense pressure on mortgagees, including those who are still decades away from paying off a house that is now unliveable.

As has been the case in all of Australia's recent floods and other natural disasters, people have largely been left to tackle the emergency on their own. Again, many affected residents have reported that evacuation warnings and orders came late or not at all, leaving them with little time to prepare to leave their homes.

This has been reflected in the hundreds of people trapped in their cars and homes as flood waters rose. The volunteer-based State Emergency Service received more than 5,000 calls for assistance and carried out more than 250 flood rescues on Sunday and Monday.

In addition, many more residents were rescued by individual family members, friends and neighbours in their own small boats.

With no fully-funded disaster response service at the state or national level, the federal Labor government has turned to the only department not subjected to continuous funding cuts—the military. Yet despite the massive resources of the Australian Defence Force, just 200 troops have been mobilised to aid the rescue and recovery operations in Sydney.

On stark display in the current disaster is the contrast between the vast sums of money handed over at a moment's notice for war, and the pittance made available for disaster relief.

On the same day floods were devastating Sydney, newly elected Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese was in Ukraine, committing Australia to a further \$100 million in military aid for the US-NATO war against Russia, bringing the total to \$390 million. Australia is now one of the largest non-NATO funders of military arsenal for Ukraine in the proxy war against Russia.

Meanwhile, families whose homes have been destroyed will receive just \$1,000 per adult and \$400 per child.

In other words, the election has changed nothing. Albanese is continuing with precisely the same program as former Liberal-National Prime Minister Scott Morrison, whose election defeat came in no small part because he was widely hated for his callous and inadequate response to bushfires, floods and the COVID-19 pandemic.

More substantial flood recovery grants, while officially budgeted for, are subject to an onerous and lengthy application process. More than three months after floods devastated the northern NSW town of Lismore in March, less than a third of recovery grant applications had been

approved, while thousands had not even been processed.

The complete abdication of responsibility for human lives by the state and federal governments was sharply expressed in the Lismore floods. After the effort to rescue people—including some who were trapped in roof cavities and on their rooftops for hours—was almost entirely coordinated by local residents, the community waited days for any official assistance, as food and fresh water supplies dwindled.

NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet last week endorsed this program of leaving emergency responses up to local communities, calling for the “wonderful and beautiful” individuals who risked their lives to save their neighbours to play an even more central role in future disasters.

This parallels the mantra of “individual responsibility” that has been used as the pretext for the “let it rip” COVID-19 policies embraced by all Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike. The homicidal approach, demanded by big business, has already resulted in more than 8 million infections and 10,000 deaths in Australia, figures that continue to climb rapidly even as the few remaining public health measures are scrapped.

This disregard for health and lives is mirrored in every country in the world, except China, as capitalist governments demonstrate every day that they consider no amount of illness and death too high a price for the furthering of corporate profits.

The stark contrast between this attitude and the heroic rescue efforts by self-organised groups of workers illustrates the incompatibility of capitalism with a society that is planned rationally and democratically to protect health and lives and meet social need.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of rank-and-file neighbourhood and workplace committees as the beginning of a political fight for a workers' government to implement these socialist measures.



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