

Australia: As floods continue, Albanese maintains indifferent response of former Liberal-National government

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As the massive rainfalls that have battered the east coast of Australia for five days ease and floodwaters begin to recede, around 47,000 people are still in danger, with 67 evacuation orders and 22 evacuation warnings remaining in place across New South Wales (NSW).

Following four days of heavy rainfall and catastrophic floods in Sydney, the extreme weather shifted to the mid-North Coast region. The regional town of Taree recorded its wettest day on record, receiving 305 millimetres (12 inches) of rain in the 24 hours to 9 a.m. Thursday. Falls in excess of 100 millimetres were widespread throughout the region.

At Singleton, the Hunter River peaked at 13.7 metres, well above the level reached in March. Around 35,000 people in Maitland, almost half the population, were isolated by floodwaters as the city received 285 millimetres of rain throughout the week.

At least 85,000 people have been impacted over the past week as devastating floods hit the state for the fourth time in 18 months. Thousands are still without power.

By yesterday afternoon, 6,853 insurance claims had been submitted, totalling \$80 million in damages. While these figures are expected to climb further, they will still reflect only a fraction of the true cost of the disaster. Many residents in flood-prone areas are uninsured, as insurance companies either refuse to provide cover or demand unaffordable premiums, in some cases as high as \$28,000 per year.

As in all the recent disasters, official warnings came late or not at all, and people had to rely on family, friends and neighbours to survive the crisis.

While former Liberal-National Prime Minister Scott Morrison was heavily criticised for his handling of bushfires, floods and the COVID-19 pandemic, the events of the past week underscore that the newly elected Labor government is equally indifferent to the health, lives and livelihoods of ordinary people.

As the floods hit Sydney, Prime Minister Anthony

Albanese was in Ukraine, announcing an additional \$100 million in military aid for the US-NATO proxy war against Russia. This is a stark expression of the priorities of Labor and the entire Australian ruling elite.

While state and federal budgets for health, education and other social spending, as well as public sector wages, are slashed amid rapidly rising inflation and government assistance for disaster victims is grossly inadequate, vast sums of money are instantly made available for war.

Albanese hit out at those who likened his absence from the country during the crisis to Morrison's infamous Hawaiian holiday during the 2019–20 bushfires, saying: "Some people apparently didn't get the memo about the new politics.... There is a war going on that has implications for Australia and for our national security and our safety as well."

Clearly though, Albanese's swift return to Sydney for a series of photo opportunities with flood victims was motivated by real concerns over the seething anger and frustration among working people. Albanese was joined by NSW Liberal-National Premier Dominic Perrottet at these events, reinforcing the de facto national unity government established with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and stepped up since the federal election.

In Windsor, Albanese and Perrottet met a harsh response from residents. Local man Scott Hinks told the leaders: "We actually need action now. You've had flood studies since 2012, but nothing's happened. We've tried ringing local government and state government. No-one's gonna help me clean up. Three months ago, everyone was talking about fixing the same problems, but nothing happened."

Perrottet attempted to deflect this by saying that the local council had been slow to respond after the March floods, to which Hinks responded: "I wouldn't blame the council. This is way beyond the council, this is all levels of government."

Albanese and Perrottet gave a joint press conference Wednesday at which they announced a federally funded disaster recovery payment. Flood-impacted residents in 29

eligible local government areas will receive just \$1,000 per adult and \$400 per child, the same miserly figure given to those affected by the March floods.

Both Perrottet and Albanese lauded the use of military personnel to assist with flood rescue and cleanup. Perrottet declared: “To have the ADF [Australian Defence Force] on the ground quickly inspires confidence.”

In reality, the effect of this deployment was minimal. Just 100 troops and two helicopters were involved during the first five days of the floods, while a third helicopter was to be made available Wednesday night and an additional 150 military personnel deployed yesterday.

Instead, the bulk of the official response fell to the volunteer-based State Emergency Service (SES), Rural Fire Service, Surf Lifesavers, and local individuals. Perrottet again endorsed this setup, saying: “The soul of our country is based on volunteers.”

Albanese insisted there was no need to establish a permanent civilian disaster recovery force: “I believe the ADF are responding and I have complete confidence in them.”

The use by successive governments of the ADF to respond to natural disasters is also directed at normalising the presence of troops in civilian settings, in preparation for the increased utilisation of the military to suppress social and political unrest.

Both leaders acknowledged the increasing frequency and severity of floods and other disasters as a result of climate change. That is why, Albanese declared, “my government has changed Australia’s position on climate change from day one.”

In fact, according to a May report from Climate Analytics, if Labor’s target to reduce carbon emissions 43 percent by 2030 and reach “net zero” by 2050 was adopted globally, the planet would be warmed by at least 2 degrees Celsius.

According to data extracted from around 70 peer-reviewed climate studies by the website Carbon Brief, 2 degrees of warming would increase the frequency of extreme rainfall in northern Australia by 17 percent, southern Australia by 22 percent and globally by 36 percent.

While Australia’s domestic emissions are among the highest in the world on a per capita basis, the country’s main contribution to greenhouse gas emissions is as a massive exporter of coal and other fossil fuels. Not only has Labor refused to shut down existing coal mines, but Albanese has made clear his government is committed to supporting new ones.

The continued inaction of governments in Australia and around the world on climate change is entirely at odds with the sentiments of ordinary people. In recent years, millions of workers and young people have attended mass rallies

demanding an immediate reversal to the profit-driven destruction of the environment.

The “climate policies” advanced by Labor, the Greens and the “Teal” independents are utterly bogus, centring around subsidies to big business and “market-based” solutions designed to enrich the financial elite, while doing nothing to reduce emissions.

Even without the additional impacts caused by climate change, the irrationality of planning under capitalism has put tens of thousands of people in danger by allowing large-scale development in known flood-prone areas.

According to the Insurance Council of Australia, around 200,000 homes nationally are in frequent flood zones and 1.5 million are susceptible to flood. Working-class families, driven into these low-lying areas by hugely inflated house prices and falling real wages, are the worst affected.

James Pittock, a professor in environment and society at the Australian National University, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: “The government should buy these homes back.

“This is a problem that New South Wales governments have known about for over two centuries. They’ve simply failed to put in place the land-use planning to prevent people being put in harm’s way.”

The reality is that science-based planning and disaster responses are fundamentally incompatible with capitalism, in which every decision is based on the need to maximise the profits of big business.

There is an alternative: A political fight for a workers’ government to carry out the reorganisation of society on a socialist basis, democratically and rationally planned to protect health and lives, and meet social need.



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