

Australian parliamentary report exposes—and whitewashes—government response to floods

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More than six months after the first of this year's devastating floods in eastern Australia, over a thousand residents of Lismore and other northern New South Wales (NSW) communities remain homeless.

Government promises of housing, even temporary tiny portables, have gone widely unmet. Many people are camping in their damaged homes or elsewhere, still waiting for possible buy-back or relocation schemes from yet to be officially-designated flood-prone areas.

This is another demonstration of government indifference to the victims of the disaster, who were left to rescue themselves in February, and of the underlying failure of the capitalist profit system to protect working-class people from the increasing severity and frequency of such climate change-related catastrophes.

An inquiry into the floods by a multi-party NSW parliamentary committee has documented a string of failures by successive state governments to adequately prepare for, and respond to, the disaster. Largely as a result of these failures, the floods claimed 13 lives across northern NSW in February and March, and left 4,055 homes uninhabitable.

In the report, Dr Hanabeth Luke of Southern Cross University described the plight of flood victims: "People who are doing better have got mobile homes. Those who aren't doing so well are in dome tents in the mud... some people aren't getting any support from their insurance... a lot of people are being told we need to wait until the outcome of [a] CSIRO study."

That delayed federally-funded Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) research project into possible government flood mitigation measures is not expected to produce a final report until May 2024.

Despite the critical picture the parliamentary report provides, it is a political whitewash designed to ensure

that no one in the state or federal governments is held accountable for the suffering that the floods have caused.

The inquiry received 90 submissions, 120 responses to an online questionnaire, and held six short public hearings in the towns of Windsor, Ballina, Lismore and Murwillumbah and at parliament in Sydney. The report includes nightmarish accounts from flood victims, and also outlines the inability of the state's volunteer-dependent disaster recovery agencies to rescue and shelter survivors after years of government cuts.

In one eyewitness account, a Lismore resident described how her property was deluged after escaping flooding for 100 years. A Woodburn resident recounted how floodwaters tore a water tank from its foundations and moved it by 360 metres. A farmer said her farm was lost because the road nearby was inundated "despite never meaning to flood."

Revelations about the response of authorities were damning. Not only was the NSW government unprepared for and unable to comprehend the unfolding floods, but treated the events "as if they were a 9-to-5 business operation."

The report concluded that two key government agencies, the NSW State Emergency Services and Resilience NSW, did not provide sufficient leadership and coordination during the floods. The centralisation of the SES and a lack of resources hindered that agency's response. Resilience NSW failed to engage affected communities and still lacked a clear role in disaster recovery despite being established in 2020 by the state Liberal-National government.

The SES issued out of date, inaccurate and confusing flood warning and evacuation messages, made worse by chaotic information channels. According to the Lismore Citizen Flood Review Group, each emergency

information service had its own communication system, forcing residents to use multiple applications and web sites to access emergency information.

As a result, some communities received inaccurate information about the extent of flooding to expect in their towns, while others received no warnings at all. A resident from Bogangar in the Tweed Shire said 300 houses in the town were damaged by floodwaters because no warning was received.

While thousands of individuals, families and businesses depended on recovery centres during the floods, some centres were either not planned or being operated effectively, hindered by inadequate supplies and a lack of coordination.

Applicants for state government grants experienced the stonewalling of their applications due to complex application processes and had to repeatedly recount their experiences, to the detriment of their mental well being.

Yet for all these failures and the crisis still being faced by flood-devastated communities, the report's recommendations show that for Australian capitalism, it will be business as usual, with crumbs for the victims.

Of the 37 recommendations, one called for the NSW government to bolster its caravan accommodation program instead of providing temporary high-quality housing for displaced residents. Another called for a service agreement with a private firm to manage and receive donations during natural disasters—suggesting that working people would pay out of their own pockets for future recovery efforts.

There were no demands for concrete flood mitigation measures, such as dam upgrades, flood barriers or the cessation of property building on flood plains. Despite references to climate change, the report made no call for firm action to counter it, declaring instead that residents would be at the mercy of increased and more intense flooding.

One ominous recommendation was for the appointment of a “senior law enforcement officer” with combat experience to oversee future disaster recovery efforts, based on the experience of installing a police deputy commissioner as the northern NSW recovery coordinator during the floods.

This is another warning that the ruling class, faced with mounting social discontent, is turning increasingly

to authoritarian methods to suppress unrest.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) said in its March 6 statement, “Australia’s floods: An indictment of capitalism,” the floods, coming on top of the 2019–20 bushfire catastrophe and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, exposed the contempt of governments—Coalition and Labor—for the health, lives and livelihoods of ordinary working people.

“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 explained.

While governments left residents to fend for themselves, however, ordinary people came together, as they did in the bushfire calamity, to rescue victims and provide food, shelter and assistance to those in need, using social media platforms to organise independently.

As the SEP statement outlined, this embryonic self-organisation by working people needs to be informed by a socialist perspective and developed into a mass movement fighting to take political power in Australia and internationally.

The statement called for working-class people to establish their own rank-and-file committees in workplaces and working-class areas, independent of the pro-capitalist parties and trade unions, to fight for the necessary measures to protect the population and for the total reorganisation of society on a socialist basis to protect health and lives, and meet social need, not corporate profit dictates.



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