Australian governments treat Lismore flood victims with contempt

Mike Head
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Some eight months after a devastating flood on February 28, governments have left thousands of working-class residents of the Australian regional city of Lismore homeless. Many are couch-surfing, camping in wrecked houses or living in overcrowded campervans.

Lismore, together with the surrounding Northern Rivers region of New South Wales (NSW), has become ground zero for a broader social crisis. Ruling class contempt for the victims of climate-change related disasters has combined with soaring rents and inflation, and the lack of public housing across the entire country.

Bitterness and disillusionment are growing. The federal Labor government, like the Liberal-National Coalition government that was thrown out of office on May 21, has done virtually nothing to help the flood victims, while handing out millions of dollars to businesses to rebuild their operations and pouring billions into military spending.

At the downtown Lismore caravan park, families are living in rows of tiny vans, with all their possessions crammed into vehicles designed only for brief holidays. Tiny fridges, poor cooking facilities, cramped beds and limited laundry areas add to the intolerable situation.

The low-lying caravan park is located in a flood-prone area, forcing evacuations whenever heavy rains threaten to return. Further floods are likely, including over the coming year.

Several residents spoke to the WSWS last weekend to expose the shocking conditions and condemn the governments and profiteering landlords responsible.

Lorna showed us her cramped campervan. She said she, her adult daughter and two adult sons had been living in three such vans for six weeks and "for God knows how long until I can find somewhere to go—a rental, maybe."

Rents have doubled since the flood, Lorna explained. She was paying $360 a week but would now have to pay over $700 because her family needed a four-bedroom house. Her daughter is working at a roadhouse on low wages and her two sons are looking for work, but employers only want juniors in order to pay them less.

"Trying to have your home in a van is terrible," she said. "I don't know how governments can expect people to live in a motorhome. Surely there's a hotel room or something somewhere. And we're in one of the first places in Lismore to flood. Are they going to keep shipping us out every time it rains?

"We have a Labor government now but nothing's getting done. Are we going to be still sitting here next March? It's shocking isn't it? I feel like I'm just a number. They don't care about us."

It was also "shocking" that dairy giant Norco was getting another $35 million from the Labor government, on top of previous grants worth $19 million, but only planning to re-employ 140 workers—about half the previous workforce—when it reopened its Lismore ice cream factory, possibly next April.

"They take all that money, and they can't even keep their employment. $35 million could have built a nice place that we could all have our own little units in. Governments always give money to business. Norco is one of the biggest companies in this town. It's terrible. I don't know how the people who used to work there are getting by."

Discussing the refusal of Labor and the unions to stop the Norco retrenchments, Lorna said: "It's definitely wrong. These governments are saying fight wars for them, but they treat us like rubbish."

Recently, when heavy rain was forecast, all the van residents were suddenly shifted out to the town of Casino, around 30 kilometres away. About 20 police were mobilised to order them out, with little time to pack or prepare their vans for the trip, resulting in damage to TVs and other belongings.

"Police were called to knock on van doors to enforce it, to put fear into you. They were here to arrest us if we didn't leave. I felt like a criminal."

Lorna had rented her home for 18 years. "I paid that house off for him!" she said, referring to her landlord. Yet after the flood wrecked the house, the landlord refused to pay back her $800 bond and later tipped all her family's possessions out onto the street.

"It was heartbreaking that he would treat me like that, but he said the banks were on his back, so he had to empty the houses. He owns five houses in the same strip, plus other houses in Lismore. Plus the government gave landlords $15,000 per flooded house, while tenants got only $5,000 to pay for all their

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lost items."

In the floods, she recalled, "we weren't prepared for what happened. Our house was above the 1974 flood level, but the waters went to the top of the doorways. We totally lost everything. We had no warning and no help.

"When we got told to leave, the water was already lapping the car floor. People were using little boats to rescue others. Old people were being told to climb into their roofs!"

Tracey said she and her family had been living in vans for six months. Now she faced a "Catch-22." If she accepted a transfer to a "pod"—one of the temporary units being constructed by the NSW state government on the remote outskirts of Lismore—she would lose her entitlement to rent assistance to later move into a house.

"We have been told that if we leave the caravans and go into a pod, we don't get help from DCJ [the state Department of Communities and Justice] anymore to move into houses. Yet we don't know how long we are going to be here in the campervans!

"These 'pods' are little houses. You would be basically in a box, next to another box, next to another box. You would get two years' rent, free water and electricity. But it's a bit like a refugee camp… It's not survivable. I need another house to rent, so I need rental assistance.

"I was paying $340 a week in rent but now I'm looking at $580, up to $680. Landlords are opening up all the houses that have been flood-affected… I won't go back into a flood area. They are asking for $470 or $480 even for flood-affected houses."

Things had only gotten worse since Labor took office over four months ago. "Now rents are impossible. Developers are moving in everywhere. Even Lismore is being built up by people with money, so the prices will go up. This is their time to make as much money as they can out of people. The saddest thing is there is no public housing for anybody."

Tracey was sick of government buck-passing on every application for assistance. "My phone is full of the calls I make every day to catch up on stuff. It's ridiculous. They are making it as hard as they possibly can. They really are…

"There have to be thousands affected like us. People are living in tents in their yards or inside their houses that have no walls. They're not counted in the homeless. These 'pods' are not going to be enough. And people will get kicked out because they are not used to living like that, and then what will happen to them?"

Tracey denounced the state and federal governments. "No one has been to see us. Not one government person has come down here to see what is happening. They are not helping. I finally got [local Labor MP] Janelle Saffin down here for half an hour or 45 minutes. She spoke to two of us, then she rushed off. You guys have spent more time here than any of them.

"The governments need to be taken over by someone who knows what is going on here… What happened to Labor? They used to be for workers years ago. What's happened?

"Nothing's for the workers anymore. It's all about greed. Look at the wages. You can't ask for a pay rise anymore… Rents have doubled, but wages haven't doubled at all."

Tracey also said it was "ridiculous" that the governments had scrapped COVID-19 pandemic isolation periods and payments for infected workers. "We're replaceable when you are working at a mundane job. You can't say anything. But if politicians get sick, they get time off and they get paid!"

Health problems were aggravated as doctors were not bulk-billing or taking new patients anymore because governments had frozen doctors' rebates under the Medicare public insurance scheme. "I have waited up to a month to see my doctor at times."

Tracey agreed that there needed to be a massive reconstruction of Lismore to move people out of the floodplain. "Stop putting these flood houses up for rent!" she said. "It's all about money!...

"The wealthy have bought new houses during the pandemic and now they are kicking people out by upping the rents. We're all getting rorted. They want to keep us poor. It's the only way to have people under you. They need the lower ones. If we were rich, they wouldn't rule.

"A revolution has to come. We all need it. It's one world and one race, the human race, and we do need to fight for it because we are really getting ploughed into the ground. We are the majority by far."

To fight back, the flood victims, Norco workers and their supporters throughout the community have to take matters out of the hands of the governments and the trade unions. They need to form a rank-and-file committee, totally independent of the unions, to oppose the retrenchments and denial of flood assistance, and discuss a broader struggle for a socialist program and a workers' government to completely reorganise society on the basis of social and human need, not private profit.

We encourage Northern Rivers residents and Norco workers to contact us to discuss this perspective and the establishment of an independent rank-and-file committee.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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