

Four killed as devastating floods hit Australia's most populous states

Martin Scott
25 October 2022

For the third time this year, large sections of south-eastern Australia have been hit by devastating floods and extreme weather. While floodwaters are beginning to recede in the worst-affected areas, the risk remains, with heavy rainfall expected to return. Hundreds of flood warnings and evacuation orders remain in place.

Rainfall records have been shattered across New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria. By October 15, Sydney had recorded its highest ever annual rainfall total, while Deniliquin, Balranald, Wilcannia, Bourke, Cobar, Griffith and Moree had their wettest-ever October. The northern Victorian towns of Kyabram and Echuca have posted records for the month of October, receiving six months' worth of rain in just a few weeks.

At least four people have been killed as the floods have ravaged Victoria and NSW:

- 71-year-old Rochester man Kevin Wills was found dead in his backyard on October 15. He is survived by his wife, who was rescued from the house after becoming trapped by the flood.
- The body of Brian Hack, a 65-year-old resident of Nathalia, north of Shepparton, was discovered by a relative in floodwaters on October 18.
- A body, thought to be that of 63-year-old Phillip Alvaro, who had been missing since October 11, was discovered on October 19 on a flooded property near the Lachlan River in western NSW.
- The body of a woman, believed to be a 28-year-old who was missing after a car she was riding in became trapped in floodwaters on Sunday night, was found near Mudgee in central-west NSW on Monday morning. The driver and two other passengers narrowly escaped.

In the NSW-Victoria border town of Echuca, the Murray river peaked yesterday morning at its highest level since 1975 and is expected to remain at a similar height for several days.

Some residents are considering legal action over an emergency levee that was constructed to protect "critical assets" in the town centre, while other neighbourhoods were left to fend for themselves.

They claim the situation has been exacerbated because water is being pumped from the protected side of the levee into the backyards of houses on the other side as heavy rainfall has

continued.

Outside the levee, some residents have remained in their still-flooded homes. 71-year-old Graham Baldwin told the ABC on Monday: "I remember in [the 1993 floods], the SES were towing boats around with sandbags. I haven't seen that this time, it's just been me and my young brother battling away."

Further downstream along the Murray, including in Swan Hill, residents face an anxious wait, as major flooding is expected in the first week of November.

In Mooroopna, near Shepparton, a major regional city two hours' north of Melbourne, the Goulburn River peaked at 12.06 metres on October 17, slightly below the 12.09m reached in 1974, but residents say the impact of last week's flooding is worse than what occurred almost half a century ago. At least 500 homes in the Shepparton-Mooroopna region have suffered flooding above the level of the floorboards.

Mooroopna resident Rita Costa told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) the flooding in her neighbourhood had started from the stormwater drains, which began overflowing three days before water from the river arrived. Residents petitioned the local council to upgrade drainage in the area after the 1993 flood, but while they had received a letter saying this would be considered, no improvements were ever made.

Costa said: "In my opinion, we were the acceptable collateral of this entire event—the council just decided we were going to go."

Parts of the town are still inundated, with heavy rainfall through the week dumping water in the region faster than authorities could pump it out. With drainage systems full, this has resulted in flash flooding and sewerage spills.

Many roads in the area remain closed, meaning residents have been unable to return home to begin cleaning up and salvaging whatever belongings have not been destroyed.

In the small town of Murchison, 30 kilometres south, around 35 homes were inundated with floodwaters reaching up to a metre. Residents described the colossal self-organised effort by the local community to protect the town centre and most of the homes.

The population of around 800 banded together to construct a makeshift levee out of some 30,000 sandbags. After the flood,

the residents faced two-and-a-half days without power, but worked together to distribute ice, bread and other essential supplies.

The 3,000 residents of Kerang, in northern Victoria, have been warned the roads out of town may remain submerged for weeks, leaving the town completely isolated.

Almost two weeks after low-lying parts of the west Melbourne suburbs of Maribyrnong, Kensington, Ascot Vale and Keilor were first inundated, the streets remained lined with ruined furniture, carpets, appliances and other belongings.

At a community meeting in Maribyrnong last night, residents expressed frustration over the continued woeful response of local government and other authorities to the devastating floods. Several said it had been difficult to contact a support hotline set up by Emergency Response Victoria, and that when they did get through, those staffing the line did not appear to have adequate training, information or authorisation to help.

Residents also reported the inadequate warning they had received from emergency services ahead of the flood. One man said, "I got a message at 4:40 in the morning saying the river was going to flood... By 7:30, the water was in my driveway, by 11 o'clock it was in my house. Where was the early warning?"

These comments echo the experiences of ordinary people in every natural disaster that has occurred this year. Again and again, residents have had little or no warning of the impending catastrophe and have been left to fend for themselves, with the only assistance coming from the self-sacrificing and heroic efforts of others in the local community.

There is continued controversy over a 2.5m wall around the nearby Flemington racetrack, which locals and hydrology experts believe worsened the flooding in residential areas, while ensuring the lucrative spring horse racing carnival was able to proceed unaffected by the surrounding devastation.

Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews has rejected criticism that a so-called "independent" review into the approval of the barrier by Melbourne Water will be conducted by the state-controlled agency itself. At the time the wall was approved, current Melbourne Water chairman John Thwaites was the state's deputy premier and water minister.

This is just one stark expression of the subordination under capitalist "planning" of the safety and needs of ordinary people and the environment to the profit interests of corporations and the wealthy.

NSW Emergency Services Minister Steph Cooke said on Monday that some 4,000 people across the state had been told to evacuate over recent days and hundreds of properties had been impacted.

Cooke said there was "literally a flood risk in every corner of the state," with more communities threatened "than at any other time this year."

Residents of Lismore and other parts of the Northern Rivers were bracing earlier in the week for the impact of a third major flood this year, with heavy rain and hail predicted in the region.

Some low-lying parts of south Lismore were inundated, but, at least so far, floodwaters have not neared the devastating heights reached in February and April.

The worst impact was further inland. Around 4,000 people in Moree were told to evacuate and the streets were covered with up to 40cm of water. Dams at Inverell and Manila have overflowed, with WaterNSW describing the situation as "unprecedented in recent decades." The agency said some of the dams had released their entire volume, only to be filled again by continued heavy rainfall.

Three successive La Niña climate events have left catchment areas saturated, meaning heavy rainfall has quickly swelled rivers to record levels. The current La Niña event is expected to remain in force until December, meaning the country could face further disasters in the coming months.

In an interview with the 7am podcast, lead author for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) global climate change assessment report Dr Johanna Nalau drew the connection between the warming global climate and the increased frequency of natural disasters.

Nalau said: "[a] lot of the climate change impacts that are being for instance discussed in the media that would happen in the future, some of them, we are already seeing those implications here in Australia."

One capitalist government after another, throughout the world, has demonstrated that the existential threat presented by climate change will never be resolved as long as environmental policy is dictated by the profit interests of major corporations.

The Greens-backed Labor government is no exception, recently passing a bill that nominally aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 43 percent of 2005 levels by 2030, far short of what the IPCC has estimated is necessary to avoid potentially irreversible climate change.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact