

Australia: Lismore flood victims protest against buy-back scheme ‘limbo’

Mike Head
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Nearly a year on from floods that devastated the northern New South Wales (NSW) city of Lismore, many of the victims are still homeless or living in makeshift accommodation. That is despite much-touted promises jointly made by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet three months ago that a “buy-back” scheme would address the crisis.

Anger over delays and lack of transparency, and concerns over profiteering developers, were voiced when about 50 residents protested outside the state government’s Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation (NRRC) office on Monday.

The discontent further points to the sham of the “Resilient Homes Program” that was announced by Albanese and Perrottet on October 27. Their joint appearance in Lismore that day was a desperate attempt to stifle outrage in the city and more broadly over the flood disaster, in which people were first forced to rescue themselves from raging waters and then largely left to fend for themselves.

Today, most flood victims are still being kept in the dark about the outcomes of their applications under the government-subsidised buy-back, lift or renovate scheme. They also fear that, given the nature of the capitalist “housing market,” the program will be used to benefit developers and investors, not residents.

Citing “privacy” issues, and the need to assess individual circumstances and properties on a case-by-case basis, the NRRC has continued to refuse to release maps indicating which streets or properties are likely to receive buy-back offers. The purpose is to atomise the community into individuals, and hide the overall plan, which is a community issue, not a personal one.

An added concern of residents is that even if selected flood victims are compensated with the market value of their homes prior to the floods, exorbitant property prices will prevent many from remaining nearby in the communities where they want to live.

More than 6,500 people have registered for the scheme but the NRCC has only started a “case management pilot” in

December involving just some 130 home owners “in the highest flood risk areas.” The corporation has provided no deadlines for outcomes. It says it “expects” that the first valuations and letters of offer for buy-backs will “be completed early this year.”

Numbers of speakers at the protest called for the NRRC and government to ensure fair and equitable outcomes for residents, landowners and renters impacted by the floods. Rally organiser Miriam Torzillo said: “We want the NRRC to intervene in the market. We want them to buy and develop the land so that the money is not going to land developers. So that we can keep communities and neighbourhoods together.”

“People’s homes hang in the balance,” she said. “The NRRC has not provided basic answers to people so they can move on with their lives. They have the information, they have the funding, yet we are stuck waiting for answers.”

Harper Dalton said: “We’ve been waiting nearly a year now since this disaster. Many of us have been living back in our flood-affected homes or caravans or other types of unreasonable situations for too long. I believe the community deserves to know the answers about our future and what that’s going to look like.”

Following the main speakers, the microphone was made available to affected people. Camilla called for the NRRC to send out 6,000 letters by the end of the week telling the applicants who would be eligible for house buybacks, house raising, and retrofitting.

Camilla provided a picture of the dire situation facing many flood victims. “There are people who are having their houses foreclosed on by banks in my street, parents who couldn’t afford Christmas presents for their kids and are struggling to put food on the table as they wait in limbo for the NRRC outcomes,” she said.

A leaflet advertising the rally listed “Our concerns—our questions.” It called on the NRRC to “ensure that the Resilient Homes Program does not create more inequality

and that communities can stay connected to each other and the services they need. Renters, older people and people with disability must be protected.”

The statement asked: “What will you do to make sure that this program is affordable and that developers and investors are not the ones to profit?”

None of these questions have been answered. A Facebook statement by the organisers reported: “Conversations on social media suggest that investors and developers are already profiting from disaster and there is potential for this to exacerbate once the Resilient Homes Program gets underway.”

The statement said residents had made it clear that they wished to be “rehoused safely and affordably, with respect to cultural, environmental and social heritage.” They wanted “the relocation of houses within sustainable, inclusive and accessible precincts” and to “stay connected to their neighbourhoods and communities.”

None of the “various forums and info sessions held so far” had “been adequate to the task of either listening to or addressing these concerns.”

This is a far cry from the pledges made on October 27, when Albanese declared in Lismore: “We know that disasters are expected to become more frequent, and more severe due to climate change, and that’s why we’re working with the NSW government to develop practical solutions to protect lives and livelihoods.”

At their joint media conference, the Labor prime minister performed a political double act with Perrottet, the far-right NSW Liberal-National premier. Perrottet claimed: “We will work with the Northern Rivers community to ensure repairs, retrofitting and voluntary buy-backs are undertaken in a way that will better protect people and their homes from future flood events.”

In a show of tripartisan unity, the Greens, who posture as an progressive alternative to Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition, welcomed the package and joined the Albanese-Perrottet announcement. Greens MP for Ballina, Tamara Smith, told the *Echo*, a local newspaper, she was “very pleased to stand with local MPs, the prime minister and the premier.”

The scheme was said to be an \$800 million package, co-funded by the federal and NSW governments, to potentially assist 2,000 flood-affected homeowners. For residents classified as living in high-risk “red zone” areas, governments would offer to buy their houses and land, supposedly at pre-flood market values. But inflated property prices in the region mean that this would not be enough to buy homes nearby.

For other homeowners, the NRRC would offer just \$100,000 to raise homes to levels considered safe from

future flooding, or \$50,000 toward retrofitting them to meet updated building standards.

Displaced tenants get nothing, even though many are still living in campervans because landlords are charging exorbitant rents. Such is the reality of the “housing market.”

Since October, the inadequacy of the Albanese-Perrottet scheme has been further exposed by the wider floods that have engulfed homes in Sydney and townships across the Murray-Darling river basin, which stretches from southern Queensland, and across NSW and Victoria, to South Australia, followed by another such disaster in northern Western Australia.

As the WSWs warned in November: “Whatever the public relations displays put on by Albanese and Perrottet, not a single assurance they utter about the scheme can be trusted.”

The “Resilient Homes Program” sham is another demonstration of government indifference to working-class flood victims, as well as the underlying failure of the capitalist order to protect them from the increasing severity and frequency of climate change-related catastrophes.

An inquiry by a multi-party NSW parliamentary committee last year documented a string of failures by successive governments to adequately prepare for, and respond to, such disasters. But there were no recommendations for the cessation of property building on flood plains or for action to halt climate change.

For decades, Liberal-National and Labor governments alike have zoned flood-prone areas for housing, allowing developers to take advantage of working-class and poorer people unable to afford soaring house prices.

As the Socialist Equality Party’s March 6 statement last year explained, 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 said.



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