# One year on, Australian flood victims still left abandoned

**Mike Head, SEP candidate for NSW Legislative Council**
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A year after the floods that devastated northern New South Wales (NSW), including the regional city of Lismore, most of the victims are still homeless or living in makeshift accommodation.

On top of the failure of governments to protect and rescue people from the disaster in the first place, this is a further indictment of their indifference and contempt for those who are suffering such climate-related catastrophes.

Two floods last February and March killed five people, destroyed 4,000 homes and damaged many more, particularly of working-class and elderly residents in low-lying areas and caravan parks. Many only escaped with their lives because of the efforts of volunteers in small boats.

Now thousands of people remain living in substandard dwellings while they wait for government assessments or insurance payouts. That is despite a joint media appearance in Lismore four months ago by Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and NSW Liberal-National Premier Dominic Perrottet.

In an attempt to quell the mounting anger, across the region and more broadly, over the government response to the disaster, Albanese and Perrottet joined hands to promote a $800 million buy-back, house-lift or repair scheme to address the crisis.

Nothing has improved, however. Outraged residents protested outside the governments' Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation (NRRC) office in Lismore last month over being left in limbo by protracted delays and lack of transparency in the scheme. Nevertheless, not a single grant has yet been made.

A public meeting this month in the flood-damaged township of Woodburn was told by the NRRC chief executive David Witherdin that it had received 8,000 applications, but only 25 homes had been assessed for potential buybacks so far. Moreover, Witherdin said the agency was "certainly oversubscribed"—that is, it had received many more applications than it could fund.

As a result, people are still camping out in wrecked homes or caravans, some outside their houses, while others are paying exorbitant rents because of the wider housing, interest rates and cost-of-living crisis.

A Southern Cross University survey revealed that at the end of 2022, almost 52 percent of flood victims were living in the shells of homes that had flooded; 26 percent were living in temporary accommodation such as caravans, sheds or government "pods," or with friends or family; 18 percent were living in insecure accommodation such as tents or temporary rentals; and 4 percent were no longer living in the region.

Many cited excessive government bureaucracy as a major barrier. Survey respondents had to fill out an average six to eight forms each to receive any financial assistance.

The state government's Resilience NSW is building 11 temporary villages of "pods"— concrete-slab blocks on small units—across the region, but these will only house 1,800 people for up to three years.

The profiteering insurance industry is also responsible. Nearly one third of survey respondents who could obtain insurance, and afford the huge premiums, reported being ineligible for an insurance payout. Even those deemed eligible are now coming to the end of the 52 weeks of temporary accommodation paid for by the insurance giants.

A long-time Lismore resident told the WSWS the situation was "disgusting." She commented: "People will be waiting for years for help. There's lots of shams going on here." In addition, rents had soared.

One of the organisers of the Lismore residents' protest, Miriam Torzillo, said the fundamental problems remained. The "immediate and urgent" problem was that people had no answers on their NRRC applications. The longer-term problem was where would residents go, if granted buy-backs. Residents were concerned about being pushed into real estate subdivisions that benefitted property developers.

The reaction of governments, both Labor and Liberal-National, has been contemptuous. The Albanese government's Emergency Services Minister Murray Watt told Sky News on January 13 it was idealistic to want to recover "much more quickly."

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Since October, the inadequacy of the Albanese-Perrottet scheme, which is confined to the NSW Northern Rivers region, has been further exposed by the wider floods that have engulfed homes the Sydney area and townships across the Murray-Darling river basin in western NSW, as well as other such disasters in Tasmania and northern Western Australia.

For decades, governments nationally have zoned flood-prone areas for housing, allowing developers to take advantage of working-class and poorer people unable to afford soaring house prices. According to the Insurance Council of Australia, 2 to 3 percent of homes across the country are now in frequent flood zones and 15 percent are susceptible to flood. That equals up to 1.5 million households living in danger.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) 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.

The chronically under-resourced emergency agencies in each state, like the firefighting services in the 2019–20 bushfire crisis, depend almost entirely on unpaid volunteers who put their lives on the line. In every major disaster, these services have been overwhelmed, requiring people to take matters into their own hands.

As of last year, just $150 million had been set aside from a federal Emergency Response Fund for disaster-mitigation projects. By contrast, more than $400 billion was handed to business during the first two years of the pandemic and nearly $600 billion allocated for military spending in preparation for a US-led war against China.

The response of Australian governments to climate change, even compared to the totally inadequate measures taken internationally, is criminal, promising only to reduce carbon emissions by 43 percent by 2030. While individual extreme weather events cannot be traced directly to global warming, scientific studies show that each 1 degree C of heating due to greenhouse gas emissions allows the atmosphere to hold about 7 percent more moisture, making heavy rain events more likely.

The SEP statement urged the formation of rank-and-file committees in workplaces and working-class areas and neighbourhoods independent of the pro-capitalist parties, and advanced a socialist program to address the worsening disasters, including:

- A vast expansion of paid civilian emergency and health services to respond to crises such as fires, floods and the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The establishment of a national public insurance fund to compensate individual losses and provide for the reconstruction and rebuilding of communities.
- A massive expansion of flood protection infrastructure in a coordinated plan to prevent the inundation of flood-prone areas.

The statement explained: "Politicians, corporations and the media will invariably dismiss such demands as 'unrealistic' as there is no money. However, trillions of dollars in socially-produced wealth have been amassed in private hands—the fortunes of the billionaires have doubled in the pandemic—and billions are being spent on war preparations.

"The pressing social needs of the majority can and must be addressed by placing the banks, insurance companies, property developers and other corporate giants under working class ownership and democratic control."

The SEP is standing candidates in the March 25 NSW state election to take forward the fight against war, austerity, climate disaster and the "let it rip" COVID policies supported by every other party.

The floods crisis, like the bushfire catastrophe and the COVID pandemic, demonstrates the need for the total reorganisation of society on a socialist basis so that it is planned rationally and democratically to protect health and lives, and meet social need, not feed private profits and wealth accumulation.

We appeal to working people and youth to promote and participate in our campaign as widely as possible, and above all, to join the SEP to build the revolutionary party needed to fight for this socialist program.

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