

Abandonment of Australian flood victims underscores fraud of official NSW election pledges

Mike Head, SEP candidate for NSW Legislative Council
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The Socialist Equality Party's campaign in the March 25 New South Wales state election is exposing, on many fronts, the unbridgeable gulf between the sham promises being made by the establishment parties—Labor, the Liberal-Nationals and the Greens—and the realities confronting the working class.

That includes, in particular, the unbearable cost-of-living, the danger of a US-led war against both Russia and China, the ongoing impact of the COVID pandemic and the failure of governments to protect the population from floods, bushfires and other climate-related disasters.

The fraud of the official election campaign is clearly evident across the state's Northern Rivers region. Thousands of residents—both homeowners and renters—remain homeless or living in caravans, tents or government “pods,” a year after floods devastated homes throughout low-lying areas.

A \$700 million “resilient homes” scheme was jointly announced last October by Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Liberal-National state Premier Dominic Perrottet to try to quell discontent by holding out hopes of house buybacks, or lift or repair grants. But it has left the vast majority of flood victims living in limbo.

So far, the Albanese-Perrottet Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation, the formation of which the Greens also backed, has reportedly offered only one buyback. Officials are now saying that the program will take five years to complete, prolonging the catastrophe.

Insurance companies are also disputing claims, even for those who were able to afford exorbitant premiums. As a result of the government and corporate response, many people are living in the shattered shells of houses, or in caravans on-site, alongside abandoned or totally ruined homes.

Last week, Perrottet and NSW Labor opposition leader

Chris Minns put on another bipartisan display, adding insult to injury by appearing together at a one-year anniversary “memorial and healing” service in the regional city of Lismore. Minns patted Perrottet on the back, even as the right-wing premier continued to defend the government scheme, saying that the grants process could not happen overnight.

Although Lismore is the epicentre of the disaster, it extends to other regional centres such as Ballina, Casino, Mullumbimby and Murwillumbah, as well as communities like Wardell, Woodburn, Broadwater, Coraki, Cabarita, Chinderah, Nimbin and Bungawalbin. Residents in other flood-stricken regions of the state, including working-class suburbs of Sydney and areas across the Murray-Darling river basin, have not even been included in the “resilient homes” scheme.

I discussed these issues with flood victims and other workers last weekend in Lismore. **Jedd**, a construction and roads worker, began by raising the cost-of-living crisis.

“We are pretty much all slaves and we're working our lives away to make someone else rich,” Jedd commented. “We're barely making enough to survive. The price of everything is going up, so it's hard living.

“I'm struggling. I work 50 hours plus a week and that's just enough to barely pay the bills. It's everything. Petrol and the price of food and everything is going up. Greedy rich people are buying up all the farmland.”

When I said the working class was being made to pay for the billions handed to business during the COVID pandemic, and for the “let it rip” policy to get everyone back into workplaces to make profits, Jedd agreed. “Yes, it's hard,” he commented. “You don't have much time to think about too much because it's all work and trying to figure out how you are going to pay your bills.

“I’m renting. It’s hard to imagine being able to afford to buy a house these days. I’m paying \$300 a week and that’s one of the cheaper rentals... I’ve got a little studio apartment that I’m getting a bit cheaper through a mate. I couldn’t afford to pay any more. I’m struggling to pay that each week.”

Jedd’s apartment was not damaged but he was affected by not being able to work and he knew “heaps of people” who were flooded. “It’s pretty bad the way they have been treated,” he said. “Everyone seems to be in the same boat, waiting for things to happen.”

Jedd spoke about his son’s grandfather, whose home was wrecked. “He’s in his 70s and he’s lived here for 30 years. Now he can’t live in his house, and it’s a bit hard for him to move anywhere. He was lucky to have a friend to stay with, but it’s only temporary accommodation. In between, he had a caravan in his front yard. It’s just an old caravan but he can’t afford anything else because he’s not working, he’s on a pension.”

Jeff, a retired truck driver, and his son **Steven**, a labourer, are among the 8,000 residents across the Northern Rivers who have yet to hear anything about their applications for grants under the “resilient homes” scheme. I spoke to them in South Lismore in front of Jeff’s half-repaired house, much of which still lacks internal walls.

“I haven’t got anything out of them,” Jeff said. “I’ve just been arguing with insurance companies to get something happening. It’s very hard and disheartening. My house was insured but not for flood. It would have been another \$12,000 a year for flood insurance. It’s out of hand. People can’t afford that.”

Commenting on the role of Albanese and Perrottet, Jeff said: “They came, they spoke and they were gone. This is not just Lismore but whole parts of Australia. All the grant money will disappear, like when the bushfires went through.”

Jeff added: “You’ve got to have money behind you to fix your house. The only ones who can do that are the rich. I’ve already spent around \$100,000 on this house, and got just over \$23,000 in government grants. I pulled all my super out just to have some money to live, and I didn’t have much super anyway. A lot of people can’t afford to move back in. They’ve got nothing. I don’t know how it will finish up. Lismore will never be the same.”

Steven said: “We’ve heard nothing. We’re on the backburner... People are living in caravans and tents. It’s not good. If you’ve got no money, you’re buggered...

Rents are skyrocketing here.” Jeff added: “I don’t know how people can afford \$500 or \$600 a week. It’s frightening all round.”

Jeff and Steven recalled the life-threatening events of February 28, 2022. “We had to get rescued ourselves,” Jeff said. “The SES [State Emergency Service] did nothing. My son got some of his mates round to rescue us.” Steven recalled: “The water was up to my chest and we could not get through to 000. Nothing was done. People were on their roofs, if they could get on them. People were stuck in their ceilings.”

They said they had moved back into the semi-repaired house after 10 months, just before Christmas. Basic problems exposed by the floods remained, such as the faulty sewage system, drains that do not function when it rains and broken water gauges.

I explained that the SEP is fighting for a socialist program, that is, to overturn the entire system based on private profit that dominates every aspect of life. Steven responded: “That’s right, the rich get richer. And faster. How much money do you need?”

As our election statement outlines, the SEP is the only party advancing a socialist program to reorganise society to meet the pressing social needs of the vast majority, not the private profits of the super-rich. “Not a single major social problem can be addressed, let alone resolved, so long as the world is dominated by the tiny capitalist elite and the governments that represent it,” it explains.

We appeal to all workers and young people to promote and participate in our campaign, and to join the SEP to build the mass working-class party needed for this struggle.

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