

Australian SEP candidate blocked from speaking to flood victims

Mike Head, SEP candidate for NSW Legislative Council
16 March 2023

Together with a campaign team member, on Wednesday I was denied access, as a Socialist Equality Party (SEP) election candidate, to speak to residents of the East Lismore Village of modular homes (called “pods”) that is temporarily housing some victims of last year’s floods.

As part of the SEP’s intervention into the March 25 NSW state election, we are campaigning in the state’s Northern Rivers region, where thousands of people are still living in makeshift accommodation, one year after climate-related floods inundated low-lying homes.

The state government’s isolated encampment of 52 shipping container-type units, housing up to 200 people, is located at the end of a narrow road past the East Lismore General Cemetery, on the outskirts of the regional city. This makes it remote and inaccessible, except by car or an infrequent bus service.

A fence surrounds the site, and people must register with a security guard to visit a resident.

Despite it being a state government facility, the village manager insisted that we were not permitted to enter what he described as private property. When challenged to state the legal basis for this ban, he said we could be charged with trespass. He said he was carrying out the policy of the NSW Reconstruction Authority, a government agency.

The manager claimed that any discussions we had with residents would be upsetting because they had been traumatised by the floods. That flew in the face of the many interviews and other discussions we have had with flood victims, including scores published on the WSWWS, over the past year.

To block such discussions with a candidate amid an election campaign is a clear violation of basic democratic rights, both of the SEP and the residents themselves. The residents must have the right to speak

out about their situation, still living in stopgap housing more than 12 months after the disaster, and to discuss the socialist criticism and response advanced by the SEP.

We wrote to the NSW Reconstruction Authority yesterday to ask if this was its policy, and if so why. We also asked if the residents had signed agreements that barred them from speaking to candidates or the media, and whether any other media or election candidate been blocked from speaking to them. We have received no reply.

The East Lismore village residents include home owners still waiting for answers to their applications for the state and federal government buyback, lift or repair scheme jointly promised last October by Labor Party Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Liberal-National state Premier Dominic Perrottet.

Other residents are former tenants who were rendered homeless by the floods and offered even less in government assistance, leaving them exposed to the near doubling of rents in the region since the catastrophe.

Outside the village entrance, George, a retired worker who was visiting a friend, opposed the management’s political censorship. “These are the victims of the floods!” he said. “You should be able to talk to them. They don’t have to talk to you if they don’t want to.”

One resident who was rushing to a medical appointment said the facility’s units were “better than living in a tent.” She explained that her family had been in an evacuation centre for a month, then lived in their wrecked house for months.

We spoke to a young construction worker on the site, assisting with the crane removal of a pod that had dangerously caught fire, reportedly due to a stovetop mishap. He commented that the facility was run like a

concentration camp.

The pods residents come from Lismore and across the Northern Rivers region, where thousands of homes in many towns and villages were rendered uninhabitable. About 550 households are accommodated in the East Lismore facility and 10 other sites in the region, but the demand is much greater.

In fact, such is the affordable housing crisis that flood victims are on indefinite waiting lists for pods. According to the NSW government temporary housing website: “Due to high demand, pod villages in the Northern Rivers are currently at capacity. New applicant details will be collected as part of a waitlist should a pod become available in the future.”

The government website states that the housing is for “up to two years” only. Homeowner flood victims can also apply for a “At-home caravan program” for a caravan in which to live on their property while they wait endlessly for their homes to be replaced or repaired.

These conditions, and the trampling on democratic rights at pod encampments, are another expression of the government contempt and indifference shown toward working-class people throughout the ongoing disaster, starting with the failure to rescue victims, many of whom could have perished except for heroic efforts of volunteers in small boats.

Every aspect of the floods crisis—from the lack of preparation and warnings to people, to the poor basic infrastructure and the inadequate assistance offered to thousands of flood victims—has been the direct result of the subordination of society to the dictates of corporate profit.

This is not simply a “natural disaster.” The destructive outcomes are the result of cost-cutting business and political decisions, as well as the refusal of governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, to take the necessary measures to halt climate change, which is driving such extreme weather events.

The ongoing floods fallout, like the devastating 2019–20 bushfires and the continuing 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. That would include:

- * Providing billions for public healthcare, education,

housing and other essential services, not militarism and war.

- * Vastly expanding paid civilian emergency services to respond to crises such as fires, floods and the COVID-19 pandemic.

- * Placing the banks, insurance companies, property developers and other corporate giants under public ownership and democratic working-class control.

As our election statement explains, the SEP is standing candidates in the March 25 NSW state election to take forward the fight for such a socialist program, against the policies of war, austerity, climate disaster and “let it rip” COVID supported by every other party.

These are the issues that we intend to keep discussing with flood victims and all workers and young people, and providing them with a means to speak out. We appeal to all our readers to support our election campaign and demand our right to conduct it without political censorship.

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