

Workers object to Australian SEP candidate being barred from speaking to flood victims

Mike Head, SEP candidate for NSW Legislative Council
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Flood victims, WSWs readers and Twitter followers have condemned last Wednesday's blocking of myself, as a Socialist Equality Party (SEP) election candidate, from speaking to residents of the East Lismore Village of modular homes (called "pods") that is temporarily housing up to 200 victims of last year's floods.

As part of the SEP's intervention into the March 25 NSW state election, we are campaigning and holding discussions with flood victims and other workers and young people in the state's Northern Rivers region. Thousands of people in the city of Lismore and across the region are still living in unacceptable makeshift accommodation one year after climate-related floods inundated low-lying homes.

With a campaign supporter, I went to the pods village to discuss the SEP's opposition to the way the federal Labor and state Liberal-National governments are continuing to treat flood victims with indifference and contempt, and to provide the residents with a means to speak out.

It is a basic democratic right for both the SEP and residents to hold such discussions, not least during an election campaign. But we were told by the village manager that we could not enter the isolated compound of 52 container-type units on the outskirts of Lismore, the epicentre of the ongoing social and housing disaster triggered by the floods.

The village manager said he was acting on the authority and rules of the state government's New South Wales (NSW) Reconstruction Authority, which set up the pods villages. That authority has still failed to reply to our correspondence challenging the ban. Moreover, the authority has no publicly-listed phone number, making it impossible for us, or residents, or anyone else, to contact it, except by email.

In our email last Thursday we posed a series of

questions about the denial of access to an election candidate to speak to residents:

"Is this the policy of the NSW Reconstruction Authority? If so, why? Have the residents signed agreements that include barring them from speaking to candidates or the media? Has any other media or election candidate been barred from speaking to pods residents? Has the premier or the opposition leader been permitted to visit to speak to residents?"

There has been no response.

Lismore residents dispute the village manager's assertions that the site was private property, despite being a state government facility, and that the residents might be traumatised by speaking with us.

One resident, Kate, who is living in a caravan park cabin after losing her home in the floods, commented: "I agree with you. To say that the village is private property is so stupid, because it's not. The residents are being treated like we were at the evacuation centre after the floods. By week 2, we were being treated like prisoners."

Kate said she had applied to be housed in one of the 550 pods across the region but waited six weeks to be told she was on the waiting list. She said the pods were "tiny, but better than living in a car—that's how desperate we are. A lot of people are still couch-surfing, living with friends or living in their houses without walls."

A WSWs reader wrote: "It seems the NSW government is taking advice from US influencers. What the NSW ruling class is imposing is a new Strategic Hamlet Program aimed at suppressing the appeal of socialism amongst NSW's disenchanted victims of the profit system.

"The claim by the NSW Reconstruction Authority a visit by the SEP would be traumatizing to East Lismore

residents is patronizing, arrogant and plainly bogus. A meeting between the SEP and East Lismore residents would only be traumatizing for the NSW government because a progressive socialist anti-capitalist perspective, alternative to their misery, would be discussed.”

Another wrote: “This shows the hostility of the ruling elites for the SEP campaign, which represents the genuine interest of the working masses. While Canberra is pouring billions of dollars for the war in Ukraine, thousands of people are still living in makeshift accommodation, even after one year.”

On Twitter, a SEP supporter commented: “Lismore is in a shocking state. Half the schools sit closed, most of the public facilities, closed. Just like during the floods, the people have been officially left to their own devices.”

The pods 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.

The cramped conditions and inadequacy of the pods scheme have produced problems. The Northern Rivers Community Legal Centre recently told the Law Society of NSW Journal that some of its clients have had problems with eligibility for the pods scheme, and some people have been removed from the accommodation with nowhere else to go.

As the SEP has explained, 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, including the refusal of governments to take the necessary measures to halt climate change, which is driving such extreme weather events.

In the SEP’s election statement, we say: “Provide billions for public healthcare, education, housing and other essential services, not militarism and war! Place

the banks, insurance companies, property developers and other corporate giants under public ownership and democratic working-class control!”

As the statement explains, the SEP is standing candidates in the NSW election to take forward the fight for a socialist program to totally reorganise society so it is planned rationally and democratically to protect health and lives, and meet social need, not feed private profits and wealth accumulation

These are among the crucial issues that we intend to keep discussing with flood victims and all workers and young people, and providing them with a means to make their views known, free from government control and pressure. 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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