

Labor's “buy-back” scheme cuts and exclusions outrage residents in Australian flood-hit region

Mike Head
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Communities across the Northern Rivers region of the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) have been shocked and angered by the release of flood maps showing that thousands of the residents whose homes were inundated by devastating floods last year will be excluded from the “buy back, lift or refit” scheme promised by the state and federal governments.

After more than 16 months of living in limbo in makeshift accommodation—including cramped caravans, the shells of houses with no walls or proper facilities, or government encampments of temporary units called “pods”—distraught flood victims in the regional city of Lismore and throughout the region have suddenly received “cold calls” from government officials, saying they are not eligible for assistance.

The excluded homes even include several in Lismore in which people died in the February 28, 2022, deluge, which killed five people amid a catastrophic failure of government emergency services that left residents to rescue each other in tiny boats. Reportedly, the flood maps are based on outdated pre-2022 data, so many of these homes would be inundated again by floods similar to the record ones of February and March 2022.

The outrage has been intensified by underhanded moves by the Labor governments in Canberra and Sydney to halve funding for their scheme, resulting in a cut from 2,000 to 1,100 in the number of households to be offered relocation. There is an overall reduction from 6,000 to 2,000 in the number of wrecked homes to be either bought back, lifted or refitted to withstand future flood disasters. As a result, many people will be denied even a refit of their homes, let alone relocation to safe ground.

Lismore residents held another protest rally

yesterday, stepping up a months-long campaign against the interminable delays and increasingly broken promises, now occurring under the Labor governments of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Premier Chris Minns.

A protest organiser, Miriam Torzillo from Reclaiming Our Recovery, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that the catalyst was the release of maps showing that many people with flood-affected properties would not be eligible for assistance under the so-called Resilient Homes Program.

“They’ve been re-traumatised,” she said. “They’ve been told to wait, and they did, and now it appears that they were waiting for nothing. A whole lot of people that had been told that their homes were unsafe, and that they would be getting [buyback] offers and that they would need to move, miraculously have been reclassified as perfectly fine.”

Not just in Lismore but throughout entire Northern Rivers communities, such as Broadwater, Coraki, Woodburn, Mullumbimby, Murwillumbah and several others in the Tweed Valley, flood victims who were previously assured of assistance have abruptly had those promises ripped up.

In Broadwater, Karen Buckley, who is legally blind and five months pregnant, had been reassured by maps issued by the governments’ Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation (NRRC) that she would be eligible for a house raise or refit, after living in a shed with her partner behind their flood-damaged home for 16 months. “So we celebrated, and then two weeks later, virtually our whole town just received these devastating cold calls,” she told the ABC.

Delegations of local members of parliament and mayors have been to Canberra and Sydney in the past fortnight to warn the Labor governments that the outrage was at an all-time high and to request measures to head it off. Despite them seeing Albanese and Minns, nothing concrete appears to have resulted. After the talks, Minns spoke vaguely about a “reset” and asked two of his ministers to visit the region over the next fortnight and report back.

No more confidence can be placed in any such statements than in the vows made by Albanese and the then Liberal-National NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet when they jointly visited Lismore last October in an attempt to appease residents’ anger by announcing the scheme and promising to provide \$1.5 billion for it if necessary.

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.”

Minns offered more empty reassurances on a visit to Lismore in April, shortly after taking office. “I’m here to listen and to make sure the community knows it’s not going to be forgotten, just because of the change of government in NSW,” he said at the time.

Instead, the \$1.5 billion promise has been quietly replaced, and halved, by funding only for “tranche one” of \$750 million.

Nearly a year and a half after the disaster, nearly 6,500 applications remain waiting on the buy-back, lift or repair scheme. Just 158 buy back offers have been made, and only 12 have been completed—about 0.5 percent of the originally promised 2,000.

Many of the people who have been offered payouts simply cannot afford to move elsewhere. The governments’ promises of new land for housing have also turned out to be a sham, with the potential real estate sites proposed for “on-ground investigations” being located far from peoples’ communities. Moreover, the sites are to be handed over to property developers for profit-making, inevitably inflating prices beyond what residents will receive under the buy-back scheme.

Meanwhile, the home-raising and refit streams—offering just \$100,000 to raise homes to levels considered safe from future flooding, or \$50,000

toward retrofitting them to meet updated building standards—are yet to even commence. As for tenants, they get no assistance whatsoever under the scheme, despite many rents doubling in the region.

As a result, even by government estimates, about 2,000 people are still living in temporary accommodation and 300 people are in emergency accommodation. This Resilient Homes Program fraud 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.

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.

Now Labor governments, in office across mainland Australia, are presiding over a cost-of-living and housing crisis that is having an increasingly disastrous impact on working-class households, while corporate profit-gouging fuels inflation and the Albanese government pours hundreds of billions of dollars into war preparations.

There is only one answer to this worsening housing and social crisis. Society must be totally reorganised on a socialist basis so it is planned rationally and democratically to protect health and lives, and meet social need. That means placing the banks, insurance companies, property developers and other corporate giants under working class ownership and democratic control.



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