

Residents denounce Labor's broken "buy-back" scheme promises in flood-hit Australian region

Mike Head
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Residents of the Northern Rivers region of the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) have spoken to the WSWS, condemning the cuts to the "buy back, lift or refit" scheme that was promised by state and federal governments after devastating floods last year.

People across the region are outraged by the release of flood maps showing that thousands of the residents whose homes were inundated will be excluded from the scheme, which has been cut in half by the state and federal Labor governments.

After more than 16 months of living in tents, campervans, caravans, the shells of houses or temporary government "pod" units, flood victims in the city of Lismore and throughout the region suddenly received "cold calls" from government officials, saying they are not eligible for assistance.

The Labor governments in Canberra and Sydney have slashed the promised funding for their scheme, resulting in a cut from 2,000 to 1,100 in the number of households to be offered relocation, and an overall reduction from 6,000 to 2,000 in the number of ruined homes to be either bought back, lifted or refitted to withstand future floods.

Jeff, whose house was wrecked in South Lismore, one of the worst-hit areas, said he had not heard from the Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation (NRCC), the government agency running the scheme—not even a phone call to tell him he was excluded.

"This is not pretty," he commented. "I knew the scheme was going to be a disaster... the politicians come here to mouth off, then they run out of money! There is a lot of anger everywhere. It's not just here, there are

problems everywhere."

Jeff's son Steve, who also lives in South Lismore, had been excluded as well. According to the reportedly outdated flood maps, "we're not in the red zone!"

Jeff said he had to use all his own money to slowly repair his house. After 16 months, he was three-quarters done, with three rooms to go.

Some people nearby had been offered buybacks, Jeff said, "but where will they go?" The money being offered for the homes, at pre-flood prices, would be nowhere near enough to buy a home somewhere else.

Asked about the fact that this was happening under Labor governments, Jeff said: "None of the political parties are worth anything." He said the scheme was "a big gimmick." The land supposed to be available for displaced flood victims was to be handed over to developers for profit. "The rich get richer," he commented. "This is a vicious circle."

Vicki, whose home was destroyed in central Lismore, said she was lucky because it was classified as being in a "red zone." But it was "random." She knew friends who have got nothing or who received buy-back offers that were far too low to let them move elsewhere. "It's appalling, it's immoral," she said.

Discussing the role of the Labor governments, Vicki said: "It's very disappointing. This is a betrayal of people's votes. The powerless are being kicked down." She spoke about people's "anger, disappointment and heartbreak." Lismore was a working-class community, so governments regarded it as "expendable."

It was "outrageous" that the promised land for people to move to was being handed to private developers. "They are making a killing," while flood victims were being consigned to remote locations away from the

community to which they belonged.

Vicki said Lismore could have been a model for how to rebuild after such catastrophes, which were bound to recur due to climate change. Money was available in the federal government's Future Fund, but "the political will was not there."

Fiona, who lives in a regional village, responded to the initial WSWS report on the cutting back of the scheme. "Good article," she wrote. "Every word is true and I totally agree as to the indifference, apathy and (I suspect) corruption of the three tiers of government. I also agree with nationalising the utilities and banks."

Not just in Lismore but throughout the entire Northern Rivers—in towns such as Broadwater, Coraki, Woodburn, Mullumbimby and Murwillumbah and many smaller communities—flood victims who were previously assured of assistance have had those promises ripped up.

This bitter betrayal by the Labor governments of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and NSW Premier Chris Minns underscores the indifference and contempt of capitalist governments—Labor and Liberal-National alike—for the health, lives and livelihoods of ordinary working people.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) drew out in its March 2022 statement on the flood disaster: "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."

There was a stark contrast between the governments, which have left residents to fend for themselves, and ordinary people, who have come together, as they did in the 2019?20 bushfire calamity, to rescue victims and provide food, shelter and assistance to those in need, using social media platforms to organise independently.

We said this embryonic self-organisation by the working class needed to be informed by a socialist perspective and developed into a mass movement fighting to take political power in Australia and internationally.

We pointed out that "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." We outlined and explained the necessity for a socialist program to address the disasters, such as floods, bushfires and pandemics, being produced by the failures of the profit system.

The SEP statement concluded: "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."



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