

Australian state Labor premier tries to coverup betrayal of flood victims

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26 September 2023

In a contemptuous display, Chris Minns, the Labor Party premier of the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) visited a flood-damaged house in the regional city of Lismore on Tuesday.

Conducted as a media photo-op, the visit sought to promote a small house repair scheme relying heavily on volunteer labour. This is a supposed substitute for the scrapping of a joint housing assistance promise by the state and federal Labor governments.

Previously, both the Labor governments had held out hopes of a \$750 million second tranche of an inadequate joint federal-state “Resilient Homes Program” to buy-back, lift or refit homes that were gutted by the record floods of February and March 2022.

Instead, in its first budget, handed down on September 19, the state Labor government offered only \$150 million for a new Community Restoration Flood Fund to be shared between the state’s flood-devastated Northern Rivers and Central West regions.

On Tuesday, Minns tried to showcase a pitiful \$5 million government grant to a “Two Rooms Project” that he said had enabled the partial restoration of windows, walls, kitchens and bathrooms in about 160 homes, with another 200 to go.

This is a drop in the bucket compared to the more than 6,000 flood victims across the Northern Rivers region who have applied for help under the “Resilient Homes Program”—most of whom are being denied assistance.

As a result of Labor’s betrayal, a maximum of 1,100 people will be offered buy-backs, and a few hundred will be eligible for housing-lifting or refitting to protect them from future flood disasters.

Not just in Lismore but throughout entire Northern Rivers communities, such as Ballina, Broadwater,

Coraki, Woodburn, Mullumbimby, Murwillumbah and several others in the Tweed and Richmond valleys, flood victims who were assured of assistance have had those promises torn up.

This has further shocked and angered residents after 18 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.”

In a public relations bid to appease and divert the outrage triggered by the budget announcement, Minns claimed that the Two Rooms Project showed how budget funding for the program was changing lives. His government was “standing by communities.”

The truth is that, just like the Liberal-National federal and state governments that were in office at the time of the floods, the Labor leaders are abandoning the flood victims and leaving them to fend for themselves with the help of charities and volunteers.

The Two Rooms Project is described as a partnership between the not-for-profit Winsome and Lismore Soup Kitchen Inc, the Lismore Catholic Diocese, Joel Jensen Constructions, charity Reece Foundation and volunteers.

On his tour of a partly-repaired house, Minns was flanked by an entire entourage. It featured Planning and Public Places Minister Paul Scully, Emergency Services Minister Jihad Dib and Housing Minister Rose Jackson. They were accompanied by local Labor member of parliament Janelle Saffin, whom Minns recently appointed Parliamentary Secretary for Disaster Recovery, and Elly Bird, the executive director of the Resilient Lismore volunteers group.

On his first grandstanding visit to Lismore as premier in April, Minns made a cynical pledge to “prioritise”

the region and “reset” the Resilient Homes Program. He said the time for promises was over, and “now we have to deliver.”

Now it is clear that his government’s only “priority” and “delivery” has been to repudiate any expansion of the inadequate scheme.

Parliamentary secretary Saffin defended the Labor government’s betrayal after the September 19 budget. She said she had hoped for more than \$300 million in funding from the budget, but would make do with the designated amount. She said community leaders would be “chipping away” at the housing need with the government’s Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation (NRCC).

The NRCC, which works closely with private property developers, has a long record of delay and obfuscation, and of making buy-back offers that are too small to allow flood victims to afford alternative homes in the region.

Another local MP, the Greens member for Ballina, Tamara Smith, said the community had been “short changed” by the budget. “My question to the premier will simply be, ‘who is going to be missing out, and what do you say to my community?’”

Smith and the Greens were among those who had urged flood victims to rely on the government’s pledges. On August 24 Smith “welcomed” a statement by Minns in parliament that he would have “more to say” on the second tranche of the Resilient Homes Program in the budget. “The Premier’s response to my question in parliament today is proof that the community’s passionate advocacy is working,” Smith said.

As the Socialist Equality Party has warned, no more confidence could be placed in any such Labor government statements than in the vows earlier made by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and the then Liberal-National NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet. The pair jointly visited Lismore last October in an attempt to appease residents’ anger by announcing the buy-back scheme and promising to provide \$1.5 billion for it if necessary.

Instead, the \$1.5 billion promise has been halved, with joint federal-state funding only for “tranche one” of \$750 million.

This fraud is another demonstration of government indifference to working-class flood victims, as well as

the underlying failure of the capitalist system 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, permitting developers to exploit 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 a severe impact on working-class households, while profit-gouging fuels inflation and the Albanese government pours hundreds of billions of dollars into war preparations and income tax cuts for the wealthy.

The floods catastrophe, like the 2019-20 bushfire disaster and the ongoing 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 corporate profits.



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