

Labor governments betray Australian flood victims

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The full extent of the broken promises made by federal and state Labor governments to the victims of the terrible floods that engulfed thousands of homes in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales (NSW) in February–March 2022 is becoming ever-more evident.

Twenty months on from the first of the two floods, only one-tenth of flood-affected homeowners in the region who applied for assistance under the federal-state “Resilient Homes” program have received a guarantee their house will be bought by the scheme. And not a single person has had their home retrofitted or raised to protect them from future floods.

To be precise, just 11 percent of the 5,001 applications made in the Tweed, Byron and Lismore municipal council areas had been approved for a buyback by the end of September. Across the six local government areas impacted by the floods, 6,700 homeowners expressed interest in buybacks. But only 1,100 have been budgeted for, plus 400 house raises or retrofits to either lift homes above flood levels or renovate them to withstand flood damage.

As at the end of September, just 632 buyback offers had been made. Of those offers, 128 homes had been purchased by the program. No house raises or retrofits had been approved at all.

Residents were told by successive governments, both Labor and Liberal-National, that about 6,000 homes would qualify for the scheme. Last week, however, Simon Draper, the head of the agency now running the program, the NSW Reconstruction Authority, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “7.30” program that this was a “miscommunication from the NSW government.”

Draper said: “We’ve acknowledged that in the past that was wrong. And I think not only is it wrong, but

it’s very detrimental to the wellbeing of people in the Northern Rivers to have been told one thing, one case, another thing in another case.”

That is a false political picture. What has occurred is another example of the contempt, indifference and deception with which capitalist governments of all stripes treat the victims of the increasingly disastrous consequences of their policies.

Specific vows were made by federal and state government leaders. Last October, Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and then Liberal-National NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet jointly visited the regional city of Lismore to attempt to appease mounting residents’ anger over the lack of government assistance. Together, they announced the “Resilient Homes” scheme and promised to provide \$1.5 billion for it if necessary.

Albanese cynically 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.”

The current NSW Labor Premier Chris Minns offered another such reassurance on a visit to Lismore this 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 dumped, and halved, leaving funding only for “tranche one” of \$750 million. Instead of the promised second tranche, the Minns government’s first budget, handed down on September 19, provided 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.

Not just in Lismore, a city of about 45,000 people, but throughout Northern Rivers towns and villages, such as Ballina, Broadwater, Coraki, Woodburn, Mullumbimby, Murwillumbah and others in the Tweed and Richmond valleys, flood victims were assured of assistance, only to have Labor governments tear up those undertakings.

This has further outraged residents after months of living in limbo in makeshift accommodation—including cramped caravans, the shells of houses with no walls or proper facilities, and government encampments of temporary units called “pods.”

To add to the wrath of residents, the cuts to the scheme have been officially justified by flood-mapping based on pre-2022 floods. That is, the February 2022 deluge has not even been included in the calculations of flood risk! That flood broke all previous records, but it was a forewarning of the more extreme and potentially catastrophic weather conditions being produced by the failure of capitalist governments to seriously address climate change.

Some homes in the worst-affected streets, such as South Lismore, have been classified as being in the lowest priority level—level four—disqualifying them from assistance. Others in designated zones have still not been assessed. Repeated phone calls by residents to the NSW Reconstruction Authority have not helped to speed up the process.

Even those residents offered buybacks have often been unable to afford to move out of the flood zones. The average buyback offer of \$583,567 is nowhere near enough to purchase a home in the upper areas of Lismore, for example, where prices are around double that.

An accompanying \$100 million Resilient Lands scheme has still not produced a single alternative block of land for buyback participants. Nor has any detail been provided on how that scheme would make land affordable, the timeframe for delivery and how much a block of land could cost. The only likely beneficiaries will be land and property developers looking to profit from it.

As for the tenants who were flooded out of their homes, they have received virtually no assistance, while landlords have taken advantage of the crisis to more than double rents in Lismore and other affected areas.

Just like the Liberal-National federal and state governments, which were in office at the time of the flood disaster and left the residents to rescue and fend for themselves, the Labor governments that took office on the back of these bitter experiences have abandoned the flood victims.

This is part of a wider betrayal. For decades, Liberal-National and Labor governments across the country have zoned flood-prone areas for housing, permitting developers to exploit working-class and poorer people unable to afford soaring house prices.

Labor governments, in office across mainland Australia, are presiding over a worsening cost-of-living and housing crisis that is devastating working-class households, while corporate profiteering stokes inflation and the Albanese government pours hundreds of billions of dollars into war preparations and income tax cuts for the wealthy.

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.”

We outlined a socialist program to address the disasters, including wars, floods, bushfires and pandemics, being produced by the crisis and failures of the profit system. The statement explained the necessity 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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