

Australia: No “resilient homes” in Northern Rivers until at least 2026, more than four years after devastating floods

Mike Head**12 February 2024**

Last Friday, nearly two years after floods destroyed or damaged thousands of homes across the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales (NSW), the state Labor government unveiled a yet-to-be detailed plan to set aside supposed flood-free land for about 400 new dwellings in Lismore, the main regional city.

“This is hope. This is progress,” NSW Premier Chris Minns said. In reality, this is another desperate bid to keep quashing discontent over the ongoing failure of the state and federal Labor governments, like their Liberal-National predecessors, to assist the victims of the floods.

“We acknowledge that it has been a long wait for Northern Rivers communities to access safer land and housing options,” Minns stated. That is a contemptuous understatement. The announcement said the land is not expected to come onto the market until 2026. As residents immediately objected, this is too late to help most of the flood victims.

Even that date is unlikely to be met. The announcement said the government-owned property developer Landcom would commence “early enabling works” on the East Lismore development site later this year, “subject to approvals.”

Moreover, only 20 percent of the land would be designated for “affordable housing,” plus some unknown number of plots for participants in the government’s equally-stalled “buy-back” scheme. That means many people will not be able to afford to buy any of the land, let alone build homes.

No details have been provided as to how much the land will cost. That will depend on the profits to be extracted by Landcom and other developers. The announcement said detailed design and planning work, and developing a formal commercial agreement, would now start.

Like everything else under the Labor and Liberal-National governments, basic social needs, including those of the wider housing and homelessness crisis, are subordinated to the interests of the financial and property billionaires and the

rest of the capitalist ruling class.

This is the first project to be even foreshadowed under the state government’s \$100 million Resilient Lands Program. Yet that program was promised more than 16 months ago. And it was meant to cover the entire region, which includes Ballina, Mullumbimby, Murwillumbah and other towns and villages in the flood-prone Tweed and Richmond river valleys, as well as Lismore, a city of about 45,000 people.

Minns said Landcom and the NSW Reconstruction Authority had signed a “Heads of Agreement” with Southern Cross University for 72 hectares of university land to be made available in East Lismore.

The development would include a mix of low and medium-density housing, and low-rise multi-dwellings. An unspecified number of serviced lots would be offered first to residents who received buy-back offers under the government’s Resilient Homes Program in order to shift out of flood zones.

According to the government, about 700 buy-back offers have so far been approved for flood-affected properties across the Northern Rivers, and nearly 500 have been accepted. That is about 10 percent of the more than 5,000 applications made in the Tweed, Byron and Lismore municipal council areas for a buy-back.

Across the six local government areas impacted by the floods, 6,700 homeowners initially expressed interest in buy-backs. But the state and federal governments last year halved the scheme from the promised \$1.5 billion. As a result, only 1,100 buy-backs are budgeted for, plus 400 house raises or retrofits to either lift homes above flood levels or renovate them to withstand flood damage.

Even those residents offered buy-backs have often been unable to afford to move out of the flood zones. The average buy-back 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.

Accompanying Minns on Friday, local Lismore

parliamentarian and state Labor Parliamentary Secretary for Disaster Recovery Janelle Saffin, said those people whose buy-back applications had been approved would be allowed to live in their homes while they waited for land to become available.

In other words, they could stay in their flood-damaged houses, in flood-prone areas, for at least two more years, even if they could afford to buy land in the promised housing estate.

The announcement has further angered residents after nearly two years 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.”

South Lismore resident Jo Groves, whose home was damaged in the February 2022 floods, contacted the Australian Broadcasting Corporation to vent her frustration in a text message.

“I was expecting that they had spent this last two years putting a package and plan together so that those affected by the flood who had managed to hang in here this long could begin to move our houses now, this year,” she said.

“I’m both bitterly disappointed and horrified that the government thinks that this is an acceptable response to the flood disaster of nearly two years ago and the ensuing housing crisis in our community.

“I understand that there also needs to be a longer-term answer and sure, two years seems reasonable for that, but where is the help for those... who’ve been hanging on so that they can stay in their community? It’s too late for most of us.”

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.

A day before the government’s announcement, it closed its Lismore Recovery Centre. This had provided minimal assistance to flood victims following the disaster, including gift vouchers, financial aid, emergency accommodation and mental health services. The government said the closure was a “significant milestone in the city’s recovery.”

These are further examples of the contempt, indifference and deception with which capitalist governments of all stripes treat the victims of the increasingly disastrous consequences of their policies. That includes their failure to seriously address climate change, which is making floods and other catastrophes, such as bushfires, rising sea levels and droughts, more frequent globally.

The federal and state government leaders have reneged on specific vows. In October 2022, Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and then Liberal-National NSW Premier

Dominic Perrottet visited 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.

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 shocking experiences have abandoned the flood victims.

This is part of a wider betrayal. For decades, Liberal-National and Labor governments and local councils 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. After floods, the governments have mostly abandoned the victims.

More broadly, Labor governments, currently in office across mainland Australia, are presiding over a worsening cost-of-living and housing crisis that is ravaging working-class households, while corporate profiteering stokes inflation. At the same time, the Albanese government is pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into war preparations and rejigged income tax cuts that still overwhelmingly benefit the wealthy.

As the Socialist Equality Party 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.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact