

Australia: Flood victims plan convoy to parliament to protest government betrayal

Mike Head**21 February 2024**

Residents of the Northern Rivers region of the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) are planning a convoy to the state's parliament to demonstrate against the state and federal Labor governments' broken promises since the devastating floods and landslides of 2022.

The planned protest was one of the outcomes of a "community-led disaster recovery forum and workshop" in the regional town of Ballina on February 12, which was joined by about 60 people.

The event was co-hosted by two groups—the Northern Rivers, Reclaim Our Recovery in the nearby regional city of Lismore, and the Byron Flood Emergency Action Group—that emerged to organise against the ongoing failure of governments to protect people from the floods and similar future disasters.

The forum's outcome was "a resolute demand for a fully-funded flood recovery in the Northern Rivers region, specifically addressing the critical \$700 million shortfall in the Resilient Homes Program," the organisers said.

That was a reference to the flouting of the specific flood relief vows made by the federal and state government leaders after thousands of homes were destroyed or badly damaged in the floods of February and March 2022.

In October 2022, Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and then Liberal-National NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet jointly visited Lismore to attempt to appease angry residents over the lack of government assistance. Together, they announced the "Resilient Homes" scheme to buy back, lift or repair flood-damaged homes and promised to provide \$1.5 billion for it if necessary.

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, now both Labor, 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 raisings or retrofits to either lift homes above flood levels or renovate them to supposedly withstand flood damage.

Organisers of Monday's forum said only 8 percent of flood-affected homes in the Byron Shire, one of the region's municipal council areas, had been deemed eligible for a buyback, retrofit or raise. Only four homes out of 977 applications in the shire had been approved as of September 29.

NSW government officials had said that applications were "prioritised based on the greatest risk to life in most future floods," adding that "the majority of the Byron Shire is outside the highest risk area."

By October 27, the officials claimed, 34 properties in the shire had been deemed eligible for buyback, 46 for raising or retrofits, with "floor level surveys" happening at another 21 properties. That is still a tiny fraction of the applications.

Organisers of the February 12 forum quoted from Noelle Maxwell, a participant in the town of Mullumbimby who said the floods were "deeply traumatic," yet she was "coming up on two years of being kept in limbo."

Maxwell explained: "My house was flooded so badly that I have not been able to return, but I've been told multiple times that I'm not eligible for house raising. So even if I did fix my house, it would be devastated in the next inevitable flood."

The slow and woefully inadequate government response, slashed by budgetary cost-cutting, is not confined to Byron shire.

According to Premier Chris Minns' state Labor

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 just 10 percent of the 5,000 applications made in the Tweed, Byron and Lismore municipal council areas for a buy-back.

In the latest government betrayal, on February 9, Minns unveiled a yet-to-be detailed plan to set aside supposed flood-free land for about 400 new dwellings in East Lismore. The announcement said the land is not expected to “come onto the market” until 2026. Residents immediately objected, this is too late to help most of the flood victims.

In addition, only 20 percent of the land has been designated for “affordable housing,” plus some unknown number of plots for participants in the slashed “buy-back” scheme. That means many people offered buybacks will not be able to afford to purchase any of the land, let alone build homes.

Moreover, this is the first project to be even foreshadowed under the state government’s \$100 million Resilient Lands Program, which was promised more than 16 months ago. That program was supposed 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.

Plus, the thousands of tenants who were flooded out of their homes have received virtually no assistance, while landlords have taken advantage of the crisis to buy up ruined houses at cheap prices, and more than double rents in Lismore and other affected areas.

Commenting on Minns’ February 9 announcement, a Lismore resident told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “Sadly it falls into line with the modus operandi of the government to date. As if written by AI with the instructions to appear to promise everything we have wanted, but with minimal detail, to entice with hyperbole.

“The end result of which is to further divide us—the winners who can’t understand why the losers still complain, and those who are part of the Resilient Homes Program from those left out altogether.”

She said it was “another Clayton’s plan that neither attends to context or takes account of the connection between all the issues.” It was “neo-liberal

reductionism and risk management, posing as concern for our future.”

The Labor government’s betrayals of the flood-affected residents across the Northern Rivers, on top of that by the previous federal and state Liberal-National governments, is not at all unique. It is a microcosm of the contempt, indifference and deception with which capitalist governments of all stripes treat the victims of the increasingly disastrous consequences of their policies.

While pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into military spending in preparation to join barbaric US-led wars, particularly against China, and into rejigged income tax cuts that still overwhelmingly favour the wealthy, they are approving new fossil fuel projects and failing to seriously address climate change, making floods and other catastrophes, such as bushfires, rising sea levels and droughts, more frequent globally.

When disasters strike, invariably hitting hardest the poorest and most vulnerable people, governments basically leave the victims to fend for themselves.



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