

Australia: Hardship continues from North Queensland floods

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People across northern Queensland are still facing hardship and dislocation after being hit with 11 days of severe rainfall and flooding this month. Two deaths have been confirmed. Hundreds of people were displaced and thousands more impacted, especially in working-class areas.

The weather conditions were among the most extreme ever recorded in the state of Queensland. As of last Saturday, the major regional city of Townsville had recorded 115.04 cm (45.29 inches) of precipitation during the first 15 days of this month. This would make February the wettest month in Townsville's recorded history, exceeding the 114.2 cm observed in January 1953.

As well as forcing the evacuation of hundreds of people, the disaster shut down crucial services. Over 100 schools were closed after their classrooms were inundated. Farmers, particularly of banana and sugar cane, saw their crops damaged or destroyed.

Many residents of the affected towns were left without basic necessities. Thousands of people were without power for days, in some cases for over a week, such as in the small rainforest community of Paluma.

The Ollera Creek Bridge on the Bruce Highway, which is the national highway from Sydney to Cairns, connecting Ingham with Townsville, was closed for eight days after collapsing, halting the transport of critical supplies to isolated communities.

Many grocery shelves remained empty two weeks after the flooding first began. Shoppers have been required to limit their purchases of staple foods like rice, bread, and noodles, as well as basics such as toilet paper.

There is discontent with the token responses of both the federal Labor government and the Queensland state Liberal National government.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced a paltry \$8 million community relief fund, co-funded with the state government, to provide "up to" \$1 million each for eight local government associations impacted by the flooding, which is woefully inadequate to cover the costs of cleaning up, let alone to finance better infrastructure.

Albanese's government also offered tiny "disaster recovery payments" of \$1,000 for adults and \$400 for children for eligible families affected by the flooding.

Albanese flew to Townsville briefly for photo opportunities at a disaster management meeting in Townsville and a joint media conference with Queensland Premier David Crisafulli.

Like the New South Wales floods of 2022 in the Northern Rivers region and other parts of the state, the catastrophe again laid bare the extent to which capitalist governments have left working-class people exposed to extreme weather events.

That includes years of cuts to the public healthcare system. For example, Ingham's Health Service only has a 28-bed capacity, and yet was operating with over twice that number of patients at some points during the floods. Healthcare workers slept there on makeshift beds and couches.

Insurance companies worsened the disaster. They have increasingly refused to cover flood risks, which are more frequent due to climate change, or are charging exorbitant premiums to ensure their profits.

Many residents whose homes were severely damaged were not insured. One told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation his policy had been revoked. "It was a hard 'no' and when I tried to look for flood insurance with other insurers I was met with the same outcome," he said.

Insurance Council of Australia CEO Kylie

Macfarlane spelt out the class logic behind this. “The risks are high for those events and, as such, some insurers will make decisions not to cover particular risks and, in this instance, flood,” she stated.

As with all such catastrophes the poorer sections of the working class bear the brunt of the impacts. Most of the evacuees who fled their inundated homes were from low-lying areas, particularly to the south of Townsville. Of the six suburbs that formed Townsville’s “black zones” for evacuation, five were between the 69th and 83rd percentile of most socio-economically disadvantaged suburbs in Australia, according to the 2021 census by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

In 2019, north Queensland, particularly Townsville, was hit by severe flooding that killed three people and was declared a “once-in-a-century” event. Six years later, the floods, comparable to those of 2019, confirm that climate change is accelerating the frequency of these once-rare events.

One early study by the international team ClimaMeter has found initial evidence that such floods are “mostly exacerbated by human-driven climate change.”

Using a peer-reviewed methodology to provide “contextualisation of extreme weather immediately after the actual event,” the analysis compared the meteorological conditions of the Queensland floods from 2001–2023 to similar conditions between 1979 and 2001.

The researchers concluded that “meteorological conditions similar to those producing Queensland Floods are up to 17 mm/day (up to 20 percent) wetter over the coast of Queensland.”

Further, they “interpret Queensland floods as an event driven by exceptional meteorological conditions whose characteristics can be ascribed to human driven climate change.”

The ClimaMeter study was limited by the available climate data, which led the authors to state that they had “medium-low confidence in the robustness of our approach.” More detailed attribution studies may be released in the coming period to answer more definitively the influence that climate change had in intensifying the latest floods.

Nevertheless, it is scientifically unquestionable that climate change is exacerbating these types of weather events more generally. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted in our initial coverage on the floods:

Extreme weather events like these are becoming more and more frequent. The Sixth Assessment Report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released in 2023 found, with high confidence, that the “frequency and intensity of heavy precipitation events have increased since the 1950s over most land areas for which observational data are sufficient for trend analysis.”

The Albanese government has given unrelenting support to the fossil fuel industry, including by approving ten coal mine expansions, which is feeding the climate crisis and making these events more frequent and probable. The Labor-approved projects will result in CO₂ emissions that are entirely incompatible with limiting global warming to 1.5C, which is regarded as a tipping point.

While the fossil fuel industry is collectively provided with over \$14 billion every year in subsidies by federal and state governments, critical social services are left underfunded and thousands of working-class people are faced with uncertainty over the possibility of insurance payouts to repair their homes.

These political issues highlight the deepening class divisions in society and the need for a socialist solution, based on human need, not private profit.



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