

# Australian state Labor government moves to evict occupants from flood-damaged homes in Lismore

Mike Head  
17 March 2025

Last week, in the midst of a damaging cyclone and renewed flooding, New South Wales Labor Party Premier Chris Minns went on Sydney 2GB radio to announce the demolition of previously water-wrecked homes in the regional city of Lismore and the eviction of their current temporary occupants.

Minns' threat is the latest in a long line of betrayals by the state and federal Labor governments of the residents of the state's Northern Rivers region, where floods in early 2022 left 4,055 properties declared to be uninhabitable and damaged another 10,849, according to government estimates.

The premier's declaration was directed against homeless people living in damaged vacant houses, which were meant to be repaired or moved under the government's totally inadequate post-2022 buy-back scheme.

It also came as Cyclone Alfred, which re-flooded parts of Lismore, demonstrated the lack of government housing programs, disaster preparedness and infrastructure upgrading over the past three years.

Unlike the 2022 floods, the city's central business district narrowly escaped inundation in the cyclone, because the engorged Wilsons River barely remained below the level of the inner-city levee. Even so, hundreds of residents of Lismore East, Lismore North and Lismore South were ordered to evacuate, and small businesses had to shut and pack up for five days.

In the middle of this emergency, Minns vowed on March 11 to evict supposed "overseas visitors, tourists, backpackers." This was designed to demonise the 60 or more homeless occupants of dozens of damaged houses in Lismore.

The threat displayed Labor's wider contempt for the

victims of the country's worsening homelessness and housing unaffordability crisis. Minns also said the state government would begin closing the Cyclone Alfred evacuation centres as soon as possible. He insisted that emergency shelters could not be used to alleviate long-term housing problems in the Northern Rivers, which has some of the highest rates of homelessness in Australia.

Likewise, Housing and Homelessness Minister Rose Jackson accused the people "squatting" in houses of not engaging with the state's housing and homelessness services—a claim that the occupants denied, citing long waiting lists.

Despite the outrage of many residents, the local state Labor MP for Lismore, Janelle Saffin, who is the NSW parliamentary secretary for disaster recovery, also denounced the "squatters." She told the *Guardian* that the "community already has enough to deal with" without worrying about "backpackers."

Yet homelessness has been exacerbated by the failure of the flood relief programs promised by the federal and state governments following the 2022 catastrophe. More than a year ago, in February 2024, the NSW auditor-general delivered a revealing report on the severe shortages of housing. "The current housing supply gap in the Northern Rivers is estimated to be upwards of 24,000 dwellings," it stated.

Cathy Serventy, the chief executive of Social Futures, a housing charity that has more than 100 people on its waitlist, told the *Guardian*: "It has been a slow progression of getting worse and worse. There's less affordability, less properties, and the [2022] flood wiped away most of the cheaper rentals."

Interviewed on Sky News, Saffin denied claims by

residents of being failed by governments again. She declared that “we can’t fix everything overnight.” She spoke of a yet to be released “plan for regional recovery.”

Saffin also defended the insurance companies, saying they had committed to dealing with their customers differently since 2022, even though they have jacked up premiums to unaffordable levels or denied access to flood insurance. She described Lismore now as an “uninsured community,” but claimed the government was trying to address the problem.

In October 2022, Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and then Liberal-National NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet visited Lismore together to attempt to appease angry residents over the lack of government assistance after that year’s February and March floods. They announced a “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 in 2023 the state and federal governments, now both Labor, halved the scheme from the promised \$1.5 billion. As a result, only 1,100 buy-backs were budgeted for, plus 400 house raisings or retrofits to either lift homes above flood levels or renovate them to supposedly withstand flood damage.

Earlier this year, almost three years after catastrophic 2022 flooding, the federal and state Labor governments agreed to jointly allocate another \$180 million to the buy-back scheme, still leaving it far short of the original promise.

In addition, many of the 600 or so residents who were offered buy-backs could not afford to move out of the flood-prone areas, because of soaring house prices and mortgage repayments. Moreover, little affordable land has been made available for purchase under the governments’ “Resilient Lands” scheme, leaving flood victims having to buy blocks of land on the private real estate market at sky-high prices.

Miriam Torzillo, a resident of flood-affected North Lismore, condemned Minns’ eviction threat. She told the *Echo*, a local newspaper: “If the premier were so keen on the safety of Lismore residents, then he might push the [NSW] Reconstruction Authority to ensure remaining homeowners could afford to relocate their homes, instead of waiting for the promise of land under

the failed Resilient Lands program, as well as to relocate the many people who barely survived the 2022 floods only to be told they weren’t eligible for any buyback or house raise.”

Antoinette O’Brien from the Reclaim Our Recovery group commented: “The previous owners were assured their houses would become housing stock for people in need. They would be devastated to see them demolished.” She said Minns was trying to “evict occupants who are seeking shelter in a housing crisis and caretaking the properties before any eventual relocation.”

Prime Minister Albanese again briefly visited Lismore during the cyclone for a photo opportunity, praising the work of volunteers, emergency services and soldiers whom the government deployed to undertake recovery work.

The Labor governments’ treatment of the flood-affected residents across the Northern Rivers shows the indifference and deception with which capitalist governments invariably treat the working-class victims of the disastrous consequences of their policies.

While pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into military spending in preparation to join US-led wars, particularly against China, Albanese’s government is approving new fossil fuel projects and failing to seriously address climate change, making cyclones, floods and other catastrophes, such as bushfires, rising sea levels and droughts, more likely globally.

As the Socialist Equality Party documented in its statement on the 2022 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 WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**