

# Australia: Cyclone Alfred exposes government failures

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Earlier this month, Tropical Cyclone Alfred crossed the eastern coast of Australia and moved through the country's third largest population centre, home to nearly five million people, including Brisbane, the Queensland state capital.

The impacts included at least one reported death, widespread flooding of low-lying working-class areas, over 300,000 homes without power—many for several days or even over a week—and thousands of people dangerously cut off phone and internet access.

Almost exactly three years before Cyclone Alfred, flooding in southern Queensland and northern New South Wales destroyed thousands of homes and killed at least 16 people. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) released, on March 6, 2022, a statement titled "Australia's floods: An indictment of capitalism."

The statement outlined how the destructive outcomes of the flooding were not merely a "natural disaster," but rather the result of profit-driven and cost-cutting political decisions, combined with the refusal of Labor and Liberal-National governments alike to mitigate climate change.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* stated in our recent coverage of Cyclone Alfred:

None of the basic political issues raised in that statement—lack of disaster preparation, inadequate and privatised infrastructure, housing development in flood-prone areas, prohibitive cost of disaster insurance, reliance on volunteers and the military, and climate change—have been addressed by governments since.

In fact, Cyclone Alfred revealed a worsening government failure.

## Vulnerable infrastructure

Cyclone Alfred laid bare inadequately prepared infrastructure that is susceptible to weather disasters, particularly in energy and communication services.

Hundreds of thousands of homes lost power and communication for days on end, causing considerable hardship and cutting them off from information about the storm and flooding dangers, as well as from news of loved ones.

More than 250,000 households lost access to the NBN mobile phone

network across southeast Queensland and northern New South Wales (NSW). NBN Co said the majority of outages had been due to power blackouts.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's Labor government has failed to deliver on its proposed national mobile disaster alert system, promised for the end of 2024 but now said to be possibly expected in 2027.

A 2024 report from Engineers Australia analysed how resilient the country's energy sector is, titled "Energy Security: Where did we go in 10 years?" In the words of civil engineer Neil Greet, who led the research, "basically, nowhere."

Key weaknesses include overhead power lines that can be damaged by falling trees during storms, instead of underline power lines, as well as a lack of substation batteries that could supply power to entire suburbs in the event of a power outage.

Successive state and federal governments have evidently concluded that these measures are too costly, despite the fact that they would have no doubt substantially reduced the likelihood of the electricity disruptions witnessed during the cyclone.

## Housing development in high flood risk areas

Housing continues to be built in flood-prone areas, with over 1.3 million households in Australia susceptible to flooding according to data from the Insurance Council of Australia.

In 2022, the WSWS wrote that due to "soaring house prices and falling real wages, working-class families often have no option but to live in these low-lying areas."

In Queensland, median house prices have since risen from \$768,000 in March 2022 to \$923,000 in December 2024, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. That is an increase of 20.2 percent, almost double the 11.79 percent rise in the Wage Price Index in the same period.

The economic pressure to live in flood-prone areas overwhelmingly falls onto the most financially disadvantaged households. Of the over 200,000 homes across Australia classified at high risk of annual flooding, 35 percent are in areas where the median income level is below the poverty line of \$58,000 per year.

## Soaring price of home insurance and inadequate disaster relief payments

Furthermore, with increasingly prohibitive costs of disaster insurance, or the refusal of insurance companies to provide flood coverage, over 20 percent of those households have no flood insurance, exposing them to potential financial ruin.

In 2022, a report from the Actuaries Institute revealed that the average (mean) price of home insurance was \$1,534 per year. An updated report from 2024 found that had increased to \$2,774 per year.

The number of households in a vulnerable state of home insurance affordability (defined as needing to spend at least four weeks of gross annual income) had increased by 600,000 since 2022, bringing the total to 1.6 million.

The soaring price of home insurance was most pronounced in the state of Queensland, where households suffered an almost doubling of annual premium costs from \$2,089 to \$3,815.

As a result, just over a quarter (26.5 percent) of Australians have no home insurance, according to a 2024 survey from Compare the Market. This leaves millions of working-class people, particularly those who are younger, in financial peril in the event of an extreme weather event such as Cyclone Alfred.

In response to the cyclone, the federal Labor government has offered paltry fortnightly payments of up to \$1,007 for those who have lost work or income. That figure is below the official poverty line. For many workers, it would barely cover the cost of rent and groceries.

## Lack of disaster preparation

Around 600,000 homes at risk of flooding in the country fall short of modern planning and building standards. No government has taken steps to fund flood-resistant upgrades to homes, such as brick walls and flood gates, or to ensure that new homes are built with such measures already in place.

There has been no effort to create paid civilian emergency services trained and ready to respond to events like cyclones, floods or bushfires. Instead, emergency response is relegated to largely volunteer organisations like the State Emergency Service (SES) and increasingly to the military.

The government's real priority is to prepare not for natural disasters, but for war. Compared to the \$200 million per year allocated for a Disaster Ready Fund, the Labor government has pledged \$56 billion per year for the military, rising to \$100 billion annually by the end of the decade.

## Climate change

Without speculating at this early stage how much of Cyclone Alfred can be attributed to climate change, extreme events like it are becoming more frequent due to the effects of global warming.

Far from reducing Australia's contribution to rising greenhouse gas emissions that are fuelling the climate crisis, the Albanese Labor government has, in the past three years, approved a further 10 coal mine expansions. It also expanded gas extraction under its Future Gas Strategy of 2024, including by approving a gas fracking station in 2022 and providing permits to fossil fuel corporations to explore and

drill in offshore gas reserves.

## Conclusion

The ruling class will not address these fundamental political issues. As the representatives of the capitalist system which subordinates human need to profit considerations, the parliamentary parties are beholden to the interests of big business and committed above all else to the survival of Australian capitalism. This program is increasingly taking the form of deepening cuts to the living standards of the working class and increased spending on militarism and war.

The political fight to safeguard the population against the threat of extreme weather disasters cannot be left to any capitalist party, including the Greens. As the SEP's 2022 statement outlined, workers and residents need to establish rank-and-file committees in workplaces and working-class areas, independent of the pro-capitalist parties and trade unions to fight for measures such as:

- Timely warning systems and a resilient telecommunication network, including in rural and remote areas
  - A massive development of flood and storm protection infrastructure, including reliable power services
  - A vast expansion of paid civilian emergency and health services
  - A national universal public insurance fund
  - An international, scientifically-based plan to halt and reverse global warming.

All these measures come into conflict with a society dominated by billionaires, the insatiable drive for private profit and the conflicting interests of rival and warring national states.

The urgent social needs of the majority must be addressed by placing the banks, insurance companies, property developers and other corporate giants under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.

That requires uniting workers in Australia and globally to abolish the capitalist system. In its place, a socialist economy must be built for the rational planning of society and its resources in the service of human need, not corporate profits and war.



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