

# Australian election: Labor's contempt for Myanmar quake victims

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Amid scenes of death and destruction following the earthquake in Myanmar, one of the world's most impoverished countries, the Labor government in Australia has contributed a contemptuous \$A2 million, or just \$US1.25 million, to assist the tens of thousands of people without shelter, healthcare and other essentials of life.

To call the amount paltry, worthless, an insult, would be a gross understatement. As of last June, every federal parliamentarian is on a base salary of \$233,660 as well as travel allowances and other perks of office. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese rakes in \$607,516 a year and the Opposition Leader Peter Dutton, who heads the Liberal-National Coalition, also makes a comfortable \$432,217 putting them both in the top 1 percent of income earners.

Albanese, who frequently spruiks his impoverished upbringing in a council flat with his mother, has amassed a property portfolio estimated to be worth \$8.8 million. This includes his purchase last year of a luxury beach house on the NSW Central Coast worth \$4.2 million, double the amount of aid his government has announced for the quake victims. Dutton is estimated to hold a property portfolio worth \$30 million.

All of this pales into insignificance compared to the multi-billionaires with whom they hobnob and whose interests they represent, such as mining magnates Gina Rinehart (\$46.3 billion) and Clive Palmer (\$22.3 billion) or Mike Cannon-Brookes (\$29.5 billion) and Scott Farquhar (\$29.2 billion) who both made their fortunes from software giant Atlassian. None of them would blink at splashing \$2 million on a birthday celebration or a few days' holiday.

The massive 7.7 magnitude earthquake that struck Myanmar on March 28 devastated much of the country and also impacted southern China and neighbouring

Thailand. In less than a week the death toll has skyrocketed to more than 2,700 and, according to some estimates, could reach 10,000 as ill-equipped rescue teams comb through the rubble of cities and towns.

Thousands more are injured. In an urgent appeal for financial assistance, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared a Grade 3 emergency—the highest level—and warned: “Without immediate funding, lives will be lost and fragile health systems will falter.”

Hospitals are already overwhelmed. “Trauma-related injuries—including fractures, open wounds, and crush syndrome—are at high risk of infection and complications,” the appeal stated. It also warning of the danger of cholera, dengue and other communicable diseases due to overcrowding, lack of proper sanitation and clean water. Immediate needs include trauma and surgical care, blood transfusion supplies, anaesthetics and essential medicines.

Mandalay, close to the quake's epicentre and Myanmar's second largest city of 1.5 million, had been experiencing something of a building boom. Now, according to the *New York Times* yesterday, “It is a city destroyed... For days, volunteers have been combing through the rubble of collapsed buildings with their bare hands. Heavy machinery finally arrived on Saturday with a rescue team from China.”

The BBC reported that the city “reeks of dead bodies” that have so overwhelmed local crematoriums that they have had to be “cremated in stacks.” “Residents say they have spent sleepless nights wandering the streets in despair as food and water supplies dwindle.”

The earthquake and powerful aftershocks have knocked down buildings and bridges, fractured roads, ruptured water supplies and brought down powerlines. Whole towns are in ruins. Serious concerns remain

about the condition of the country's dams. The damage is estimated to be as high as 70 percent of the country's GDP which was \$US64.28 billion last year.

Inevitably, the poorest layers of the population will be the hardest hit. According to the World Bank, the country's per capita GDP in 2023 was \$US1,233.20. For workers, the basic minimum daily wage is 600 MMK (Myanma Kyat) or just 29 cents (US).

A United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report released in April last year found that "76 percent of the population lives below or perilously close to a subsistence existence and poverty rates have almost doubled from 24.8 percent in 2017 to 49.7 percent in 2023."

The immediate aid being offered by the Albanese government is a pitiful drop in the bucket. Based on a World Vision estimate, the Australian government is providing just 11 cents Australian or 7 cents US each to those in need. According to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia's bilateral aid for the current year amounts to just \$A42 million, or less than \$A1 for every person.

Government decisions on foreign aid, including emergency assistance, are not made out of the slightest concern for disaster victims or the poor, but are based on cold political calculations of the likely benefits for the strategic and economic interests of Australian imperialism.

Pat Conroy, Minister for International Development and the Pacific, in announcing the token \$2 million in aid, cynically declared "our thoughts are with everyone affected by this devastating event." He made certain to add that no direct funding would go the military regime and proactive steps would be taken to ensure any aid does "not legitimise the military regime in Myanmar."

Of course, the Labor government and Coalition opposition alike have no qualms about supplying hundreds of millions in military aid to the fascistic Ukrainian regime in the US-led war against Russia, or allowing weapons exports to Israel as it carries out genocide in Gaza. However, the government undoubtedly calculated that any significant aid to quake victims would do nothing to draw the Myanmar junta into line with US-led preparations for war with China.

Moreover, the Labor government's attitude to working people in this country is no different to its callous indifference to the plight of earthquake victims

in Myanmar. Albanese and Dutton are engaged in a frankly obscene debate over their respective pledges to provide a handful of dollars a day to lessen the cost-of-living crisis facing workers and their families. And this when 3.3 million people including 761,000 children live in poverty.

The Socialist Equality Party is standing candidates in the May 3 federal election to campaign for a socialist future for the working class in this country and internationally. The crocodile tears shed by Labor politicians for the victims of floods, cyclones and fires here, and the totally inadequate aid provided to them, are of a piece with the paltry \$2 million offered to the people of Myanmar.

None of the pressing problems facing working people—war, social crises, environmental disaster and the destruction of basic democratic rights can be resolved in a world dominated by corporate profit and imperialist predation. It must be refashioned from top to bottom to ensure a life free from want and fear for all. Join our campaign today!

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