

5 killed and thousands affected by latest Australian floods

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Catastrophic flooding across eastern New South Wales (NSW) this week has resulted in at least five deaths and left over 50,000 residents isolated, particularly in the Mid North Coast, Hunter and North Coast regions. On Friday, flooding spread to parts of Sydney and surrounding areas, and the NSW South Coast.

The four-day deluge broke rainfall and river level records in numbers of locations. The swiftness of the flash flooding and river torrents caught many residents by surprise.

This disaster follows a series of extreme weather events, including the northern Queensland floods in February, and Cyclone Alfred in southeast Queensland and northern NSW in March. This is a pattern of increasingly frequent and severe natural disasters, for which the state and federal Australian governments have done nothing to adequately prepare.

The confirmed fatalities so far include a man in his late 70s whose vehicle was swept off a causeway near Coffs Harbour; a 63-year-old farmer who died while trying to protect his livestock in Moto, northeast of Taree; a woman found in her car which had been submerged in floodwaters near Kempsey; and a man near Dungog found dead after going missing during flash flooding.

The flooding has overwhelmed the insufficient resources allocated by governments, which depend heavily on volunteers in such disasters. In at least two of the deaths, the victims had called emergency services for help but were not reached in time. In other cases, people were saved by local residents in small boats, as happened in the northern NSW floods in 2022.

Emergency services, primarily the volunteer-based State Emergency Service (SES), have conducted more than 700 flood rescues. As in previous disasters, some

Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel have been deployed to assist. This again points to the lack of adequate civilian resources and preparation for these recurring catastrophes.

There have been reports of thousands of people calling for help but being left to fend for themselves. One such flood victim, Julie Botfield, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation she had called the SES and the triple-0 emergency line on Thursday night as waters rose under her house, but she had not been evacuated by the morning, so she called a friend who had a boat to rescue herself and two children.

Approximately 50,000 people have been displaced or cut off due to flooded roads, including the Sydney to Brisbane Pacific Highway in several sections, and damaged infrastructure. Residents are experiencing critical shortages of essential supplies like bread, milk and medicines, including regional centres such as Taree.

Power outages have compounded the crisis, with reports of more than 30,000 households without electricity for several days. As of Friday night, nearly 4,000 were still blacked out. Basic infrastructure, such as communication towers and power lines have been damaged by falling trees and submersion.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese made a photo-op visit to a flood-affected area yesterday, saying his message to residents was “you are not alone.” But the federal and state government assistance packages for flood victims are again pitiful—\$900 per family and up to 13 weeks’ in sub-poverty welfare payments for people who can prove they have temporarily lost their livelihoods.

The immediate conditions that contributed to this flood are heavy downpours of rain caused by a slow-moving coastal low-pressure system off Australia’s

eastern coast. These triggers combined with the fact that much of the ground in the affected regions remained saturated from previous rainfall events, causing rapid river rises.

As in previous floods, the poorest people, particularly the homeless and those living in low-lying high-risk areas, fare the worst. Combined with the cost-of-living crisis and unaffordable home insurance premiums, the flooding is leaving thousands of people devastated. Many were uninsured and some have lost almost all their possessions.

This year's floods follow years of back-to-back climate-related catastrophes, in particular the 2019 Black Summer bushfires and the 2022 floods across the Northern Rivers region of NSW.

Despite the scientifically undeniable trend of increasingly frequent extreme weather events, successive state and federal governments have done virtually nothing to prepare vulnerable regions or strengthen critical infrastructure.

As Socialist Equality Party (SEP) federal election candidate Taylor Hernan commented after this year's earlier disasters: "None of the basic issues of vulnerable infrastructure, inadequate disaster relief payments and lack of disaster preparation have been addressed."

An initial analysis from ClimaMeter indicates, with medium-high confidence, that the floods are "an event driven by very rare exceptional meteorological conditions whose characteristics can mostly be ascribed to human-driven climate change." One of the authors of the paper added: "What once were rare downpours are now becoming the new normal—climate change is rewriting Australia's weather patterns, one flood at a time."

One 2019 paper by the Center for International Climate Research estimated that for every additional degree of global warming, "the most intense precipitation events observed today are likely to almost double in occurrence." With the current projections for global emissions, the world is already headed toward around 3 degrees Celsius of warming.

By enacting and defending policies that lock in such warming, capitalist governments in Australia and internationally are effectively normalising more frequent extreme weather events that inevitably affect first and foremost the working class and the most

vulnerable sections of society.

The words of the SEP statement on the 2022 NSW floods have lost none of their relevance: "The floods crisis, like the bushfire catastrophe and the COVID pandemic, demonstrates the need for the total reorganisation of society on a socialist basis so that it is planned rationally and democratically to protect health and lives, and meet social need."



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