

Australia: Workers in flood-affected Taree denounce inadequate government emergency response

Our reporters
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Last month, torrential rains swept across the New South Wales (NSW) Mid North Coast, Hunter and North Coast Regions, resulting in devastating floods that killed 5 people, isolated more than 50,000 and required over 700 flood rescues.

The *World Socialist Web Site* sent a reporting team to the Mid North Coast, which was particularly hard hit. More than 6,200 homes and businesses experienced power interruptions (including over 3,500 in the regional town of Taree alone) and around 800 properties will require repair before they can be lived in again.

Taree and Wingham were hit with more than twice their previous rainfall records for the month of May, with 746 millimetres (29 inches) and 772 millimetres (30 inches) respectively. Most of the rain fell in the space of three to four days, causing the Manning River to swell to an unprecedented 6.4 metres.

The so-called “1-in-500-year” event was the product of a low-pressure coastal trough that held stationary for days, sustained by warmer than average sea-surface temperatures.

The official line is that such disasters are rare, unpredictable and unavoidable, however it is the second catastrophic flood to strike the region in just four years. This is part of a scientifically undeniable increase in the frequency of extreme weather events, linked to global warming.

However, capitalist governments in Australia and internationally continue to expand the extraction and use of fossil fuels, adding to global carbon emissions and deepening the ecological crisis of climate change.

As is increasingly the case with every “natural” disaster, last month’s floods again exposed the unpreparedness and neglect by both the state and federal Labor governments.

Despite numerous reviews and recommendations since the 2021 floods hit the region, no new levees, drainage systems or early-warning system upgrades have been implemented. Emergency services remain woefully underfunded, and

almost entirely dependent on volunteers for rescue and cleanup operations. The government sent just 75 army recruits who did not arrive until after the peak of the crisis.

For households, the federal government has provided meagre one-time payments of \$1,000 for eligible adults and \$400 for children, in addition to the \$180 per individual (capped at \$900 per family) granted by the NSW government.

Workers who can prove they lost their livelihood as a result of the floods can also apply for the Disaster Recovery Allowance, a poverty-level payment of around \$400 per week (equivalent to the Jobseeker unemployment rate), but only for 13 weeks.

Flood-affected small businesses and farmers can apply to local governments for financial assistance, but the federal government, which funds this program, has only declared it a “Category C” disaster, limiting such grants to \$25,000, rather than the \$75,000 that would be available under “Category D.” This will likely mean many businesses are unable to recover.

Comments from local residents to the WSWs make clear that the political establishment’s response has been marked by delays, funding shortfalls and cruelly inadequate support, especially for the elderly, working-class families and small-scale farmers.

Kathy told WSWs reporters: “I was stuck at home for four days. My daughter would come over and take me downtown to get stuff that I needed. It’s affected a lot of people. Some businesses won’t be able to open again. For the farmers, some of them have lost their whole livelihoods, and now they don’t know how they’re going to go. The cows haven’t got feed, if they haven’t got feed how are they going to produce milk? It’s terrible. The whole of Wingham Plaza [shopping centre] was flooded, they didn’t have a supermarket.

“There’s been about 700 people volunteering today, there’ll be more tomorrow. There were two young guys at

Cundletown, they went around to houses and saved other people.

“But the government should help more, should have been there as soon as it was happening. And they shouldn’t make promises that they’re going to do something and then they don’t do anything. They make false promises when they’re getting elected and then they turn around and say, ‘we’re not going to help you now.’ You go and vote and think ‘are they going to stick to this?’

“The government should have stepped up and sent a helicopter or something. They were supposed to send the army, they sent 75 army recruits up, but they weren’t there right when everyone needed them, they weren’t on time.

“The water went higher this time than before. There was a sailing club that went under and they’re apparently not going to be able to open again. There was a bakery down the street that was the same.

“Insurance levies go up and they just can’t afford it. I know a couple that lost their house previously, they were in a flood zone, but the insurance didn’t want to pay them. They were paying for their insurance [premiums], but what are the insurance companies doing with all that money people are paying them?

“At my workplace, my boss said that if the insurance levy goes up we won’t be able to stay open because we’re a non-profit organisation, we can’t afford it. If I lose my job, I don’t want to go on the dole, although people have to scrape from one week to another whether you work or not.

“I’m a childcare worker. I got a dollar [an hour] raise last year. Childcare fees are high—I know families where the parents are working five days a week just to keep their head above water and most of their money is going to childcare fees. I know a parent who said to me, ‘I’m going to work just to put it all in childcare.’ The government knows that but they don’t make it easier. And on top of that, now people have lost their farms, lost their houses.

“The government doesn’t care. When politicians retire they’re still going to get paid heaps of money. They can live a high life and we’ve got to live one week to another, it’s just not fair. I’d like to see Albanese and some of these others in parliament get up here and get their boots dirty and see what real life is about.”

Robert, a former road maintenance worker, was visiting his 80-year old father, a cancer patient now in ICU as a result of the lack of emergency transport during the disaster.

“About two or three years ago, the last time the floods were here, they helicoptered him in for dialysis. Obviously with dialysis patients, if they miss dialysis, they drown, you know, they drown on the fluids in their body. He has to go regularly Monday, Wednesday, Friday. Well, this year there was an interruption with the floods; he missed Wednesday

and Friday. I think the ambulance got to him about Saturday and he’s been in the ICU ever since.

“The reason he’s in ICU now is because there weren’t services this time to take him out of Harrington. He’ll probably never be the same again. Whereas before he could take care of himself, do his own shopping, now he is bed-ridden. The effect is going to be forever. As a family, we’ve been questioning why? Why last time it flooded he was choppered in but not now?”

Taree has a higher proportion of elderly residents compared to the NSW average, with 26.8 percent of residents aged 65 and over, compared to the national average of 17.2 percent. Funding for palliative care in Taree (including dialysis treatments) was slashed by 32 percent by the state Labor government in 2024, part of broader statewide cuts, sharpest in working-class and regional areas.

Robert continued, “I’ve never seen Taree like this. Never seen so much junk out the front of properties, especially out towards Harrington and on the highway.

“The world has turned over the last 30 or 40 years, to a point where we’re being led by people who are interested in funding their own interests.

“What is happening abroad is the complete craziest thing I think anyone’s ever seen in their life. Trump’s ‘big, beautiful bill’ that he was passing, you know, it was to give more tax breaks to bloody billionaires and attack Medicaid, all those other services and food that go out to people in the US that need it. One of the recommendations in that bill was that there be no recourse against politicians for their actions while they’re elected. You know, in a democratic society, if you do that, well, then no one’s safe.

“We’ll need to start talking about insurrection or revolutionary ideas, because as we know with the French in the 1700s, they were treated in a really bad way by the monarchs. They had a revolution.”



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