

Australia: Floods engulf Brisbane as reports reveal authorities rejected warning measures

By Richard Phillips
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The Queensland state capital was hit by massive floods yesterday when the Brisbane River burst its banks and flooded the central business district and surrounding suburbs. While the river peaked at 4.46 metres—one metre below yesterday’s predicted peak of 5.5 metres—the damage to Brisbane is devastating. Serious flooding is predicted to continue in the capital for weeks.

The official number of people killed by the floods in south east Queensland this week now stands at 15. But the toll is expected to rise as more bodies are found in Toowoomba, Grantham, Murphys Creek and the Lockyer Valley areas, which were hit by flash flooding on Monday. To date, more than 40 people are listed as missing, feared dead, from that catastrophe.

The Queensland and federal Labor governments and the media continue to insist that the events unfolding in the Queensland capital and throughout the state are a “freak” of nature.

But the devastation is a direct result of government neglect of basic infrastructure, emergency services, flood management and mitigation measures—decisions determined by the short-term profit demands of property developers and other business interests. According to the Insurance Council of Australia, only eight percent of water catchment areas in Queensland have adequate flood mapping.

Consecutive Queensland governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, claim that they learnt the lessons of the 1974 Brisbane floods and that the Wivenhoe Dam, built in the aftermath of that disaster, would prevent a repeat occurrence.

However, as the *Australian* newspaper reports today, scientists and engineers have warned the Queensland government and the Brisbane city council over the past decade that major flood destruction would occur unless

authorities took serious remedial action.

A Brisbane Flood Study in 1999 criticised the construction of tens of thousands of homes and other properties in flood prone areas in the period since the 1974 floods and warned that future floods would be 1 to 2 metres higher than predictions made by Brisbane council authorities. Likewise, state authorities in 2007 rejected a joint South East Queensland Water Corporation and state government report calling for the capacities of Wivenhoe Dam and Somerset Dam to be increased. The warnings were ignored and the reports buried. (See: “Reports warned of flood dangers to Brisbane”)

The disastrous human consequences of these decisions are now unfolding in the Queensland capital.

Over the last 24 hours, 25,000 Brisbane homes have been flooded, with initial reports estimating that 11,500 of these have been fully swamped. Power has been cut to 80,000 homes in the city, including to the central business district, which has been evacuated and shut down, while basic infrastructure—roads, sewage, water supply, electricity and other facilities—are seriously damaged and expected to take weeks and months to repair.

Thirty-five suburbs were flooded yesterday and more than 1,600 roads and streets inundated. The worst-hit suburbs are Brisbane City, St Lucia, West End, Rocklea and Graceville.

The number of evacuation centres was increased by three yesterday, bring the total number to five, as thousands of residents sought shelter and accommodation. Scores of people in high-rise riverside apartment blocks who failed to evacuate their residences remain inside these buildings, without access to power, fresh water and sewage, and only limited phone communications.

Last night authorities closed Brisbane's Gateway Bridges, fearing that tonnes of debris racing down the river would cause further damage. At one point a 300-metre concrete section of the RiverWalk—a popular tourist walkway that follows the river—broke away and began hurtling down the river. It eventually broke in two, fortunately narrowly missing the bridges.

Authorities were forced to implode a barge, a wharf and other moorings, fearing they would crash into bridges and inflict even worse destruction. Brisbane's river ferry service has also been shut down, with all its jetties flooded or badly damaged. Drift, a showcase floating restaurant on the river, broke from its moorings and crashed into the Goodwill Bridge, where it broke to pieces. That no one was killed or any of the city's bridges seriously damaged by river debris was a miracle.

Floods also engulfed the city of Ipswich (population 168,000 and 40 kilometres south west of Brisbane) yesterday when the Bremer River rose to 19.5 metres, flooding 3,000 homes. Only the roofs of many businesses and homes in the city centre could be seen from the air.

With the flood crisis deepening, Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Queensland Premier Anna Bligh are desperately attempting to create the impression that their governments are "in control" and doing their utmost to assist those most affected by the disaster.

Their efforts are thoroughly disingenuous and part of a desperate effort to cover up obvious government culpability and the fact that the heaviest brunt of the disaster will be borne by working class families and small businesses. Government relief money is a contemptible pittance. It will not even begin to restore the damage or overcome the myriad problems facing the hundreds of thousands of ordinary people and small businesses affected by the floods.

Some of the posturing has been so blatant that a *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist commented today that Prime Minister Gillard, who has made countless photo-op appearances shaking hands or embracing flood victims at evacuation centres over the past week, "struggles to strike the right note." The prime minister, the newspaper commented, "seemed wooden and not caring.... she doesn't appear to care".

One of the constant refrains of Queensland Premier

Anna Bligh and other state government officials has been that Wivenhoe Dam would protect Brisbane residents from future flooding. State officials are also claiming that because the Brisbane River has not reached the 1974 flood peak of 5.45 metres, the city has escaped the worst. These comparisons are aimed at lulling residents into a false sense of security.

In 1974 Brisbane had a population of just 911,000. Today there are more than 2.2 million people, many of them living on low lying flood-plains that were engulfed in 1974. That government and councils have allowed developers to build homes there without serious flood mitigation and management measures is nothing short of criminal.

Calls by government and the media for all layers of society to "pull together" and assist in the flood recovery have not extended to Australia's rapacious insurance companies, which generally provide no cover for flood damage. It appears that the majority of households in Queensland therefore have no home or contents insurance.

Tens of thousands of Queensland residents are either underinsured or uninsured because they cannot afford the high insurance premiums. Moreover, according to the Queensland Chamber of Commerce and Industry, only 50 percent of businesses in the state have insurance cover for loss of income.

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