

Australia: Queensland flood victims still living in freight containers

By Mark Church
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In January 2011, a massive flash flood struck the Lockyer Valley town of Grantham, 100 kilometres west of Brisbane, killing 10 people, devastating the rural township and leaving 50 families homeless.

The disaster was part of a series of major floods in southeastern Queensland, which also deluged more than 20,000 homes and businesses in low-lying areas across Brisbane, the state capital. Thousands of residents received no warnings, because of the lack of official alert systems.

Two and a half years later, many Lockyer Valley residents remain in temporary accommodation and hundreds of families in flood-affected Brisbane suburbs are in similar situations, often because insurance companies refused to pay out for flood damage. By contrast, corporate-related infrastructure, such as coal roads and train tracks, has been completely rebuilt.

Back in 2011, Queensland Premier Anna Bligh and Prime Minister Julia Gillard, both then leading Labor governments, visited some of the townships and suburbs amid media blitzes designed to demonstrate their sympathy for the residents. They vowed to rebuild the shattered communities and prevent repeat catastrophes.

In reality, the federal Labor government exploited the disaster to start cutting social spending, while imposing a \$1.8 billion flood tax levy on workers, all in the name of financing flood relief. The lion's share of Labor's \$5.6 billion aid package—\$5 billion—was allocated to restore infrastructure for the benefit of business, especially the mining industry. Gillard insisted that none of the funds would be used to repair or rebuild the homes of uninsured householders. The insurance giants demanded that no such relief be provided because it would affect their profits.

The WSWs provided extensive on-the-spot coverage

of the flood catastrophe and revealed the fact that for decades, Australian governments, local, state and federal, permitted ill-planned urban and semi-rural development in flood-prone areas, in the interests of commercial profit, while cutting spending on flood mitigation and warning measures.

In a January 2011 statement, the Socialist Equality Party said the disaster “exposed the criminal indifference of every level of government for the lives and property of ordinary working people. Elementary measures to protect communities from predictable flood events were either not undertaken or were rejected outright because they ‘cost too much’ or were obstacles to short-sighted, profit-driven development.” (See: “Australia’s floods: a failure of government and the profit system”)

Last weekend, the WSWs spoke with one of the flood victims interviewed in 2011—Grantham resident Ray Van Dijk—about his experiences since his house was destroyed.

WSWS: We spoke to you two and a half years ago when you were fighting for compensation. What has happened to you since then?

Ray Van Dijk: All I'm doing at the moment is living in a donga [a converted freight container], 20 foot by 6 foot. It has a bedroom, TV, kitchen, a storage room and that's it. My house is still not sorted out.

My kids had to move away. They can't live here; it's too hard. My granddaughter moved away with her kids and she's had to rent. My youngest daughter has had to move in with her mother, and she is suffering from depression.

There have also been ongoing issues all the way through, which includes my cars that were wrecked by excavators after the flood. They destroyed \$70,000 worth of stuff. That struggle took a year and half, and

they still gave me the minimum compensation out of that. My time putting together the paper work would have been worth more than what they gave me.

WSWS: How many others are in the same situation?

RVD: I would say there are another 10 people like me in Grantham, not in their houses properly. Some are still condemned or have poor builders. Other nearby communities are similar. In Murphy's Creek and Mount Silvia, they got wiped out. The list would be endless in the Lockyer Valley.

WSWS: Who is responsible for this?

RVD: The local council and the federal and state governments. Ordinary people gave the state government \$280 million to go toward flood recovery, but I didn't see a cent of it.

WSWS: The federal Labor government raised a flood tax levy on the basis that everyone would be helped.

RVD: It didn't happen for me. It's been hell, with just no direction, and false promises from the government. We've been left all alone. All the governments want to do is make themselves look good.

WSWS: In our coverage and statements in 2011 we pointed to the lack of proper land use planning by government bodies, driven by the profit interests of developers and other businesses.

RVD: Yes, and years ago the farmers used to burn the local creeks out all the time [to enable swift run-off in times of flood] and then the government came along and said you couldn't do that anymore.

Then the state government got \$8 million in funding to clean the creeks out, which they were supposed to do 12 months ago. But they only cleaned out the places you could see from the road. Now we had floods again in 2013 and the creek near my place is worse. Now it backs up and flows through the town even quicker!

WSWS: People were led to believe that all this remedial and preventative work was taken care of.

RVD: No, they just said that to make themselves look good... Take a look at the latest floods. We got wiped out again. No-one was taken care of at all, not even to get the people in the danger zone to safety.

WSWS: Has anything been done to provide effective flood warning systems?

RVD: People died 500 metres from my place in 2011, and they could have been saved if there was an early warning system. But in this year's flood, no-one evacuated me, even when the water got under the

house. On the news, they were saying that they evacuated the town. Well no-one knocked on my door and no-one drove down the road saying, "get out it's dangerous." If it wasn't for us locals going around and telling people what was going on, another tragedy could have happened.

The government says there is a warning system, which is supposed to be phone calls, Internet, TV and radio. But when things like this happen, you lose all your power and the phones don't work. I said they needed a siren on the hill—that's the most important thing in Grantham—but I was told that would cost too much.

WSWS: In conclusion, what issues do you want to raise with WSWS readers?

RVD: The working class man is nothing. The government only helps the big fellas out. The first thing they fixed in Grantham was the railway line and that's to keep the mines going. They didn't help the people out. Now the coal trains go through non-stop, four or five a night. It was the number one priority—not the town or the lives lost.

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