

Socialist Equality Party

Election Campaign '98

Man-made factors revealed in Wollongong storm disaster

Initial attempts by governments and the media to depict last month's devastating stormwater damage in the industrial city of Wollongong as simply a "natural disaster" have increasingly been discredited. What has emerged is a pattern of systematic planning failures, corporate greed and official contempt toward the lives and safety of working class people.

Two people died, 37 were injured and thousands of residents and small shop owners face bankruptcy as a result of damage caused by swirling floodwaters and landslides on the evening of August 17. Because of the activities of mining companies, developers and governments, torrential rain poured down mountainside slopes, where the vegetation had been stripped away, and engulfed homes. Blocked drains helped create a disaster.

Tonnes of coal and other wastes washed down from hillside collieries into working class suburbs below. In Keiraville, unsecured coal from BHP's disbanded Kemira mine created a metre-high wall of black sludge that surged through peoples' houses and blanketed streets. A dam at South Bulli colliery burst and sent coal, sludge and oil down a highway and through people's homes.

In all, at least 150 homes were destroyed or severely damaged and at least 400 more flooded. Scores of cars were washed away. Hundreds of residents were evacuated from houses and low-lying caravan parks. Many more people, including young children and elderly residents, could have been killed as they struggled to survive raging torrents. In some cases they were saved only by acts of heroism by residents.

An extraordinary amount of rain fell before and during August 17--537 mm (21 inches) over a five-day period. At its peak over 300 mm poured down in a three-hour period. Yet, the scale of the damage cannot be explained merely by the extent of the deluge. In the first place, the authorities have long known that Wollongong, whose northern suburbs sit on a coastal strip beneath a 500-metre high escarpment, is prone to heavy rain and water runoff.

Major flooding has taken place in the Illawarra region since last century--in 1850, 1883 and 1890, for example--and in recent times. In 1974, 200 mm of rain fell in 30 hours. During 1975, sandbag barriers had to be erected in low-lying suburbs to protect residents and houses.

Flood mitigation plans exist, but have not been implemented. Five years ago Wollongong City Council estimated it would need at least \$600 million (\$1 billion in today's terms) to complete flood remedial works in order to avert a disaster. Eight commu-

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nity flood plan committees have for years been working on disaster prevention programs. The City Council's Design Manager Peter Kofod has now admitted that if the necessary millions had been spent, much of the latest damage could have been prevented.

But instead of the \$1 billion needed to carry out infrastructure work, federal, state and local governments have only made available \$7 million. The federal government abandoned its rural flood mitigation program after the 1996 election, cutting a further \$1.7 million in funding for the area. The New South Wales state Labor government last year refused the City Council's request for \$1.3 million to carry out work on Cabbage Tree Creek, one of the waterways that burst its banks on August 17, causing millions of dollars of damage. Despite the creek having a history of flooding, the government provided only \$67,000.

With a federal election in the offing, a stream of political leaders, from Prime Minister John Howard to Governor-General Sir William Deane and NSW Premier Bob Carr, paid perfunctory visits in the days following the deluge, uttering statements of concern. But no funds have been released for reconstruction and remedial work.

The state government is providing extremely limited financial relief, primarily low-interest loans of up to \$80,000 for small businesses. As for the federal government, it has donated a paltry \$100,000. It has even refused to declare Wollongong a disaster area--in order to deny residents access to federal relief funds. BHP, whose mines and steelworks dominate the region, has offered a contemptuous \$20,000 donation.

Now that the human and financial cost of years of official neglect is emerging, none of the governments implicated have called for an inquiry, let alone advanced a strategy or plans to remedy the defects that have been exposed. Instead, the City Council has ruled out calls for a halt to further development approvals along the escarpment. The Labor Party leaders of both the Council and the state government will continue fast-tracking every development demanded by big business, from the Port Kembla copper smelter to BHP's sale of land for residential subdivision along the mountainside above Keiraville.

Many aspects of the disaster provide a damning picture of the private profit system at work. Only weeks before the downpour, bulldozers began clearing the escarpment land recently sold off by BHP for housing development above Keiraville. A residents' group had protested for months and established a picket line to fight the Council's approval of the project, which has a watercourse running through it.

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By the time the heavy rains came, contractors had already removed ground cover. With the undergrowth removed, water cascaded into the suburbs below. Tonnes of soil and silt flowed into Keiraville, breaking a road open in two places and bursting a pipe which led to one house being swamped with debris.

There were similar scenes all along the escarpment. The Council has allowed housing development on the middle reaches of mountains riddled with mines and tunnels, making their underground excavations even more unstable. In heavy rains water seeps through layers of sandstone and into the porous underlying bedrock.

As a result, saturated land moves upwards and outwards. Gapping splits in the cliff tops have been discovered since the heavy rains. Geo-technicians are now monitoring 13 landslip areas. The head of Wollongong University's Civil Mining and Environmental Engineering Department warned: "Geological factors combined with previous development and the history of the area, makes the northern suburbs susceptible to landslides."

Years of funding shortages and inadequate maintenance meant that many stormwater drains and creeks were already blocked by the build-up of debris before the rains begun. This left raging waters nowhere to run. They broke creek banks and begun flooding roads and houses.

Blocked drains also caused sewerage overflow. The state government's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was forced to warn people not to swim at the beaches, as they were likely to be contaminated by bacteria. Some residents, whose houses were inundated by sewerage, had to have tetanus and polio shots.

Further examples abounded where elementary planning principles had been subordinated to the drive for profit and government cost-cutting. Natural and man-made creeks had in some cases been altered, diverted or made narrower for development to take place.

Along Mount Ousley Road--the main route north to Sydney--the Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA) had erected concrete sound

barriers in 1995 without adequate guttering. Residents had complained constantly that retaining walls had not been rebuilt and that the barriers were themselves unstable. On August 17 a torrent swept down the steep roadway whilst collecting soil from construction on the way. All this was dumped into the suburbs below.

Even the decision to erect the sound barriers demonstrated the region's domination by BHP and other coal companies. The barriers became necessary when the state government abandoned plans to halt the heavy movement of coal trucks down the mountain by constructing a much safer, but more expensive, rail link.

Insurance companies are refusing to compensate residents for much of the damage caused, on the grounds that household and contents insurance does not cover flood damage. In a technical fine line that will now become a major legal issue, the insurers only cover for "storm and tempest" damage. Yet the flooding was caused by the overflow of man-made and natural creeks, as well as stormwater drains.

In the midst of residents' distress, a GIO insurance company manager defended insurers' actions, saying that if floods were covered "people would build on swamps". He added: "There is another issue about local governments allowing people to build in a flood-prone area or allowing developers to develop land with insufficient flood mitigation." Naturally, the insurance companies did not raise any previous objections to the planning regulations, warn residents or refuse to insure homes in exposed locations.

For his part the Lord Mayor, a Labor Party figure, has already declared that the City Council is not liable. A legal morass is now developing. Lawyers and residents have foreshadowed class lawsuits against the Council, BHP and the RTA. Meanwhile, the underlying causes of much of the catastrophe--the ever-greater sacrifices of social facilities and planning to meet the requirements of corporate profit--will continue.

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