

End the scourge of homelessness

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The callous indifference of the major parties to the plight of the growing numbers of homeless, or indeed any aspect of the social crisis confronting working people, is a warning of even harsher measures to come after the election.

Six years ago, during the campaign for the 2007 election, then opposition leader Kevin Rudd suddenly discovered that thousands of people in Australia were homeless. Amid much fanfare, he declared that a Labor government would “halve the number of homeless people turned away from shelters within five years and close the gap within a decade.”

This pitch was nothing more than a cynical vote-grabbing exercise to falsely present Labor as a compassionate alternative to the widely despised Howard Liberal government. Just over a fortnight away from another election, Rudd has conspicuously avoided any reference to homelessness or his 2007 pledge.

This is no accident. Rather than “closing the gap,” Labor’s pro-market agenda continued to slash billions from social spending to transfer an ever-greater share of the national income to the financial and corporate elite, ensuring that many more people were condemned to homelessness and destitution. The Rudd government’s White Paper, “The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness,” remained a dead letter.

The latest census figures for 2011 reveal that the number of homeless rose sharply, by 17 percent to 105,237 people, from 89,728 in the 2006 census. An even more damning revelation was that 17,845 children in Australia under the age of 12 were homeless in 2011, a 3,000 increase from the 2006 figure of 15,715.

Rudd’s promise only ever referred to a small proportion of the homeless—mainly those “sleeping rough” and seeking emergency shelter. But census figures cover the hidden homeless—those living in substandard forms of temporary accommodation or in “severely” crowded dwellings—that is, requiring four or

more additional bedrooms to house the usual residents of the dwelling.

Severe overcrowding accounted for most of the rise in homelessness, with a 31 percent increase from 31,531 to 41,390 people, many of them below the age of 35. Another 60,875 people were living in crowded dwellings, requiring an extra three bedrooms, and were categorised as “marginally housed and at risk of homelessness.”

Since the 2011 census, the homelessness crisis has continued unabated. According to Homelessness Australia estimates, on any given day, 1 out of every 200 Australians is homeless—without safe, secure or affordable housing. Last year, 220,000 people received support from specialist homelessness services, or 1 in every 100 Australians. Also, according to the Council on Homelessness, women now make up 44 percent of the nation’s homeless people, many of them mothers with young children.

The sharp rise in homelessness is a product of the worsening social crisis being generated by the global breakdown of capitalism and compounded by government austerity measures. Rising levels of social distress, produced by poverty, unemployment and falling real wages, are intersecting with escalating rents fuelled by rampant property speculation.

The unemployed are among the worst affected. The official figures put the jobless rate at 5.7 percent, and this is predicted to rise to 6.25 percent in 2013–14. According to the Roy Morgan survey, the rate is nearly double at 10.1 percent, with another 9.0 percent underemployed. Yet the Rudd government has categorically ruled out any increase in the poverty-level Newstart unemployment benefit of \$497 per fortnight for single people or just \$35 a day, as well as any increase in the pitifully low allowance for rent assistance.

According to the annual “snapshot” survey conducted

in April by Anglicare Australia, less than 1 percent of 56,414 properties listed for rental across Australia were affordable or suitable for anyone on Newstart allowance, parenting payment, aged pension or disability support pension.

The Anglicare snapshot also revealed that only 8.5 percent of rental properties were affordable for families of four living on the minimum wage of just \$622 a week. In May, the National Welfare Rights Network reported that more than 150,000 low-income earners are spending more than half their income on rent—well above the benchmark of 30 percent for rental stress.

According to Australians for Affordable Housing, the proportion of households suffering housing stress increases from around 38 percent for the Parenting Payment to closer to 65 percent for households on Newstart.

Moreover, property speculation is continuing to drive up housing prices, which in turn is pushing up rents across all states. The Sydney Property Finders web site reported in April that apartment unit prices in Sydney increased by 2.2 percent over the previous quarter, raising the median rental price to \$470 per week. The Real Estate Institute of Australia recorded rises of between 2.9 and 4.4 percent in median rents for three-bedroom homes in all other capital cities.

Homelessness has been further exacerbated by the ongoing decline in funding at both federal and state levels for social housing. Six years after Rudd promised steps to close the homeless gap, 173,000 people are on waiting lists for social housing across Australia.

No matter which party, Labor or Liberal, comes to power in the September 7 federal elections, the homeless crisis will continue to deepen. Both are committed to implementing the austerity measures demanded by big business that include slashing billions more from social spending. Both will back further corporate restructuring that will put thousands more out of work.

The Greens, who posture as a humane alternative to the two major parties, have pledged a pittance—\$1 billion a year to a Homelessness Action Plan to provide additional services and build 7,000 new homes by 2020. Like Rudd's pledge in 2006, the policy is aimed only at those "sleeping rough," not the far larger number of homeless living in unsuitable or severely overcrowded accommodation, or the wider social

problems of housing stress. As the Greens' record of propping up the minority Labor government demonstrates, their overriding commitment is to maintain "fiscal responsibility" and "political stability" at the expense of the working class

Only the Socialist Equality Party is advancing a program that can eradicate the scourge of homelessness. Decent, affordable accommodation is a basic social right denied to workers and youth under capitalism. We advocate the fight for a workers' government and a socialist perspective to place the major construction companies, banks and financial institutions under social ownership and the democratic control by the working class. Only in this way can tens of billions of dollars be directed, on an emergency basis, to build the thousands of decent apartments and houses required to meet the needs of all.

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