

# Sydney public housing residents denounce rent rises and poor conditions

Our correspondents  
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*WSWS correspondents spoke with public housing tenants across Sydney this month to discuss the impact of the state government's imposition of "bed taxes" and "market rents," as well as the shocking conditions produced by the government's refusal to carry out basic repairs. (See: "Australia: 'Market rents' imposed on public housing tenants")*

**Gayle**, a war widow, lives in the outer western suburb of Macquarie Fields, which has a high concentration of public housing. Only 60 percent of adult residents are employed full time and unemployment is officially close to 10 percent. Gayle said the "bed tax" would affect her directly as she has a spare room, which accommodates her children when they visit, and which she needs in case they have to move back home.

Gayle commented on some of the financial and social implications of the "bed tax," particularly for families who have lived in their homes for many years. "My friend is in a four bedroom house and she's got her daughter and her grandson living with her, and they've been with her all the time. What it effectively means for her is if the grandson or daughter decided to move out, she'd have to move. But she lives in a house that's been modified because she can't get around. There are people who can't live in flats or villas. Anyway, villas are very small—people live on top of one another.

"If there's a couple or only one, then they don't need a big house, but I don't think it's fair to force them out, and I don't think the extra rent is very fair either, because if it's been the family home for thirty or forty years then they shouldn't be forced to move."

In Gayle's apartment block, occupational health and safety checks were carried out in 2003. Fences needed replacing, along with an alarm system that would be triggered by steam from showers, and stoves that would

catch alight when cooking. However, according to Gayle, "the repairs were of such a poor standard that they caused other problems or needed repeat visits to fix the problems."

**Judith** lives in the inner western suburb of Balmain, an area that has been gentrified over the past two decades with some homes, especially on the waterfront, valued in the millions of dollars. As a result, many public housing homes have been sold off. Judith, a 60-year-old public sector worker who has lived there for 26 years, received a Housing NSW letter informing her of the rent increases for those, such as herself, who do not receive government benefits. "I am faced with having to move out, right when there has been a big rent increase," she explained. "A couple of times I have gone and looked at private rental places and almost signed the lease and then thought, 'what am I going to do when I leave work? How am I going to afford private housing?'"

Judith said maintenance was carried out on the doors a few years ago and the steps were cleaned once a month. However, she cleans them weekly because she doesn't like the mess. Repairs have yet to be carried out on the windows, which have dry rot. "Upstairs, their windows literally fell out," she said. "The whole frame fell out. So they replaced a couple of the windows, with aluminium ones. They wouldn't replace all of them, just the couple that had fallen out." Maintenance was so neglected that one of the two washing machines in the communal laundry had been broken for 15 years.

Also in Balmain, **Greg**, who is 40 and on a disability pension for his epilepsy, has lived in a one-bedroom unit for eight years, after being on the waiting list for nine years. Although the "market rent" increases will not affect him, he is concerned about the impact on

others. “The cost of living and rents continue to increase. When I first moved in, rent was around \$44-46 a week. Now it’s \$100,” he said.

“When politicians grant us a welfare increase, this also increases our rent. They give you with one hand, and take away with the other... It’s a poverty trap. If you stick to your budget strictly, you can live, but you can’t deviate from that.

“For those who work or have families, they’re going to struggle worse than they already are... All their money would be going on rent. How will they pay for food, maintain their kids, run a car, keep a roof over their heads? You’re basically pushing more of society into hardship, into living below the poverty line instead of helping them and doing something positive.”

Greg added: “My gas and electricity used to be between \$98 and \$120 per quarter but over the past 18 months it’s been \$264 and over... That is a huge amount to pay when I only get \$488 per fortnight for my disability payment. I don’t eat a lot of fresh fruit and vegetables. I can’t afford it... I’m sure I’m not the only one cutting out aisles in the supermarket because I can’t afford to buy what’s in there.”

Greg’s 50-year-old apartment block, which has a beautiful view of the waterfront, has been utterly neglected by Housing NSW. Greg said he carried out minor repairs that were left undone, despite requests to NSW Housing. He has reported blocked drains in the laundry and dry rot in the windows. “As for the peeling paint in the verandahs, there’s not been any work done on the outside of the apartments since I’ve been here... If they did regular maintenance, even just checking the drains and cleared sewage, that would be good, because having clear drains that can clear sewage is a standard of living that no one should have to live below or accept, in the democracy that we are.”

**John**, in his 60s, lives in Padstow, a working class area in Sydney’s southwest. He and his family have lived in public housing for 24 years. He said the “bed tax” would directly affect his household “because we have a daughter in hospital care.” He accused the government of finding “a devious way of extracting more and more income whilst we are already way under the poverty line.”

John commented: “This is a regressive tax, which will affect a lot of working-class families. Many people I know, especially on pensions, cannot always afford

prescription medicine or basic necessities of life, including rent and nutritional food.”

The last maintenance on John’s house involved replacement of 50-year-old windows with “flimsy new windows.” His house, like many others, was “also riddled with asbestos. Although they knew about asbestos since the first recorded deaths in about 1895 and it was declared a dangerous toxic substance, successive Labor and Liberal governments used it in large amounts in public housing and schools.”

In nearby Riverwood, **Judith**, also in her 60s was shocked to discover that in the apartment underneath hers, public housing tenants were paying \$380 per week. “For this!” she said, pointing to the poorly maintained and cramped apartment. She added: “They keep sending them letters saying they should be getting out of public housing and into private housing so other people can come in.” She described the bed-sit units in a nearby block—the type of accommodation that single tenants could be forced to transfer to—as “very unhealthy, terrible, just one room.”



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