Australia: Public housing tenants face evictions

Mark Church, Richard Phillips
11 November 2013

Hundreds of public housing tenants and their families are being evicted in Australia as federal and state governments, Liberal and Labor alike, slash state-funded housing budgets and impose new austerity measures.

Over 7,300 eviction warrants were issued in Victoria, Australia's second most populous state, in the two years to December 2012. Most were for rental arrears. This number is climbing as government social spending cuts and the rising cost of living make it increasingly difficult for tenants—mostly dependent on welfare payments—to pay the rent.

According to figures released last week, Victoria's department of human services applied to "reclaim" over 5,470 homes during the 2012–2013 financial year. Most warrants did not lead to evictions as tenants either "voluntarily" left their properties or found ways to repay their debts. But the number of forced evictions jumped by 50 percent in the past year, from 200 in 2010–2011 to 304 in 2012–2013.

National eviction statistics are difficult to obtain because the federal government does not collect or publish the figures, and the national tenants' advocacy group does not gather them either.

In Australia's largest state, according to a New South Wales (NSW) Tenants Union spokesman, more than 1,200 social housing tenants were evicted in 2012-13. This includes renters in NSW public housing properties and those managed by housing charities. Evictions in South Australia, according to media reports, climbed from 149 in 2010–11 to 203 in 2012–13.

Rental arrears are mounting, reflecting worsening financial stress. In Victoria, rental debts climbed to $15.1 million in 2012-13, up from $12 million the previous year. In the Australian Capital Territory the debt is $1.4 million (2013), in South Australia $19.7 million (2010–2011) and in Queensland $2.1 million (2012).

In a move to claw this money back from poverty-stricken tenants, the former Greens-backed Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard attempted to pass "housing payment deduction" laws. The legislation aimed to grant state housing authorities the power to garnishee tenants' welfare payments if they fell four weeks into rent arrears. It also gave the authorities access to tenants' welfare income to pay outstanding utilities or building maintenance accounts. The bill lapsed because parliament was prorogued for the September 7 federal election.

The Gillard government did however add to the financial stress facing those on welfare benefits. Last year it slashed welfare payments for 84,000 Australian single parents by moving them onto poverty-level Newstart unemployment benefits. This measure, which cut their average weekly income by up to $200, made it even more difficult for sole parents to pay their rent, let alone resolve any arrears.

Australia is a signatory to various UN conventions on the right to housing, but there are no state or federal laws preventing forced evictions. Under existing legislation, tenants have few rights. Appeals can be made to tribunals or courts in various states but apart from the Australian Capital Territory and Victoria, these bodies are not required to consider tenants' individual circumstances—including possible homelessness—when determining whether to order an eviction.

The denial of any right to housing was highlighted in Tasmania last week when lawyers issued an urgent appeal for the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing to intervene on behalf of three families facing eviction.

© World Socialist Web Site

The tenants, who were given no reason for their pending evictions, have engaged in a lengthy legal battle with the Tasmanian housing authorities. The Labor-Greens coalition government has stubbornly refused to provide any explanation for the evictions.

One of the tenants is Angela King. A public housing tenant for nine years, she is a single mother with three children, now attempting to deal with welfare cuts imposed by the Gillard government. “If I have to leave my house, I wouldn’t have a clue where to go. Maybe the women’s shelter,” King told the media last week.

King received an eviction notice when her yearly lease expired in 2012. Despite numerous requests, Housing Tasmania refused to provide any reason, other than stating that “the tenancy has not worked out.” She and her young family face homelessness, a fact acknowledged by the Tasmanian Supreme Court, which has nonetheless rejected her appeals.

Other states are stepping up evictions. The West Australian Liberal government is ruthlessly implementing a “three strikes” rule against public tenants accused of minor disturbances. It has evicted 120 tenants on this basis since 2011.

The Queensland Liberal-National government plans to introduce laws removing tenancies from any resident who has been jailed or is on extended leave from the state. It recently evicted 36 people accused of breaching their tenancy agreement.

Escalating evictions, serious shortages of affordable housing and new retrogressive measures are pushing more and more single parents, unemployed youth, the disabled and the elderly into homelessness and destitution.

According to the latest census figures, more than 105,000 people, including almost 18,000 children, were homeless in Australia in 2011, a 17 percent increase on the 2006 figure. A recent Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University investigation reported that the number of people living in rooming houses in Melbourne, the Victorian capital, rose by 400 percent from 2007 to 2012. Last year, rooming house occupancy in the city increased to 12,500.

This social crisis is driven by soaring housing costs. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, average national house prices increased 147 percent between 2001 and 2011—from $169,000 to $417,500—and the proportion of households in housing stress (paying more than 30 percent of their income on rent or mortgages) rose from 14 percent in 1994–95 to 18 percent in 2011–12.

This has produced greater demand for public housing. Combined with protracted cuts to public housing, this has left more than 200,000 households languishing on waiting lists for public housing or state-owned and managed Indigenous housing. According to the latest figures, there are 55,000 on public housing waiting lists in New South Wales, 36,000 in Victoria, 22,000 in Queensland, 21,000 in South Australia and 2,310 in Tasmania.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site