

Australia: State government to sell off Sydney Harbour public housing

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The New South Wales (NSW) state Liberal government announced last week that it will privatise 293 homes in Millers Point, an historic inner-city Sydney suburb, and 79 apartments at the Sirius block in The Rocks area nearby. About 500 working-class residents will be forced out of their homes.

The measures are part of an escalating national assault on state-owned housing. They are aimed at driving low-paid workers and pensioners out of the inner-city and making it a haven for the rich, while boosting profits for property developers.

Family and Community Services Minister Pru Goward told a press conference on March 19 that the government would begin selling off the properties within three months. As she was speaking, Housing NSW agents were delivering letters to residents informing them that their rental homes were to be sold.

Millers Point is prime real estate, near the Sydney Harbour Bridge. It is one of the oldest sections of the city, with some houses dating back to the 1820s. The homes were originally built to accommodate maritime workers. Generations of dock workers, seamen and their families lived in the area.

The selloff was initiated by the previous state Labor government in 2008, which sold 99-year-leases on 16 heritage-listed terrace houses, claiming it would be a “one off.” Two years later, it sold another 20, and gave the go-ahead for the \$6 billion Barangaroo development on the waterfront property next to Millers Point. The project will include billionaire James Packer’s second Australian casino complex, with a 70-storey six-star hotel and luxury apartment block.

Goward said the government had to sell the properties because of high maintenance costs. Virtually accusing the residents of being social parasites, she claimed that over \$8.8 million, or about \$44,000 per tenant, was

“paid” in rental subsidies to Millers Point public housing tenants last year.

These figures are an accounting sleight-of-hand calculated on the difference between the current rent paid by tenants and “market rents.” Goward is attacking the very concept of public housing, which is to provide affordable housing to those who cannot afford to pay market rents.

Goward claimed that proceeds from the sale, which, according to some estimates will raise \$600 million, will be used to provide more social housing and reduce the 57,000 public housing waiting list.

This is a patent lie. The same empty promises were made by the Labor government in 2008. Challenged in state parliament, Goward refused to confirm that any of the money would be used for public housing.

Successive Labor and Liberal governments have engaged in a wrecking operation on public housing. During the past 10 years, the NSW government has privatised over 7,000 housing properties. Last year, it sold off 500 homes, raising \$165 million. It also slashed \$37 million from the housing maintenance budget, forcing many tenants, including the elderly, sick and frail, to live in conditions that violate basic health standards.

The selloff has property developers salivating at the prospect of multi-million dollar profits. “It’s some of the best property in Australia, it just blows my mind,” one real estate agent told the *Australian*.

The more than 5,000 public housing properties in the nearby suburbs of Glebe, Redfern, Waterloo, Surry Hills, Kirribilli and Woolloomooloo offer similar prospects. Median prices for houses in these areas range from \$770,000 to \$2.03 million, and for apartments from \$580,000 to \$793,000.

In commentary reeking of contempt for the working

class, the corporate media immediately endorsed the privatisation, backing Goward's claims that the residents were being "subsidised" by taxpayers. "Never have so few been so heavily subsidised by so many," arrogantly declared the *Australian's* editorial on March 20. All NSW taxpayers, it said, "have been cheated by an arcane and inefficient housing system in dire need of reform."

Decades ago, Sydney's wealthy elite would not have been seen dead living anywhere near the smoke-filled and heavily polluted Millers Point. However, with the deindustrialisation of the inner-city, such locations are highly sought after. What incenses the *Australian* is that workers and pensioners are occupying residences that the rich and the upper middle classes pay a small fortune to own or rent.

Likewise, the *Sydney Morning Herald* declared the sale was "a tough but fair decision" because the "cost to taxpayers" was unsustainable. There should be "no sense of entitlement and ownership in public housing," the newspaper said. "In most cases it should only be temporary."

In other words, the working class has no basic right to affordable housing, in Millers Point or anywhere else. The "end of social entitlement" is the rallying cry of governments everywhere, directed against all the hard-won rights of the working class—housing, education, welfare, pensions and other social gains.

About 200 shocked and angry residents attended a public meeting last Saturday and some 400 people marched through Millers Point yesterday (see: "Inner Sydney tenants denounce government's privatisation"). Saturday's meeting was addressed by Greens state MP Alex Greenwich and Sydney city mayor Clover Moore.

Neither speaker advanced any proposals to fight the sell-off or mobilise other public housing tenants. Residents were told to stall for time—not be available for interviews with the housing department or only attend with a tenants' union or other support worker.

Greenwich and Moore postured as opponents of the privatisation while, at the same time, offering residents support if they were evicted. "We are here to work out how best to protect you into the future, protect you here and if it can't be here, as close as possible," Moore told the meeting.

Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) Sydney branch secretary Paul McAleer claimed that his union would

be the "shock troops of the campaign." He warned residents: "Don't let anyone steal your campaign, this is your campaign. These are your houses. No-one has the right to use your housing as a political weapon."

McAleer's remarks are aimed at ensuring that the MUA, along with Greenwich and Moore, remain in charge and that protests are rendered impotent. The residents can only defend their homes by breaking out of this straitjacket, forming their own independent organisations and turning to other sections of the working class to defend the right to decent affordable, public housing. That inevitably involves a political fight, not only against the state Liberal government, but the entire political establishment, including Labor and the Greens, which is responsible for the decimation of public services such as housing.

Such a struggle is bound up with the fight for a workers' government and a socialist program. The lack of affordable housing is a direct consequence of an orgy of speculation by real estate developers, banks and finance houses that have raked in billions in profits and sent rents and prices soaring. These corporations must be placed under the democratic control and ownership of the working class, and funds poured into expanding and maintaining public housing.

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