

“No section of public housing is safe”

Inner-Sydney tenants denounce government’s privatisation

Our reporters
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Millers Point and The Rocks residents spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters last weekend, following the New South Wales Liberal government’s announcement that it was privatising all public housing in the area (see: “State government to sell of Sydney Harbour public housing”).

Colin Tooher, 63, who was born and raised in Millers Point, said: “I heard on 2GB radio that I have a million-dollar view. Over the last 63 years I’ve been looking at a brick wall. Is that a harbour view?”

“We were told [in 2008] that Labor was only going to sell off 16 houses but they escalated it to about 30 and then stopped. You know why it’s jumped up? Because of [James] Packer who is putting his casino down here. He doesn’t want you or me.”

Tooher warned: “We’re the first ones they pick on. You’ve got Balmain, Lilyfield, Annandale, Glebe, Pyrmont, Woolloomooloo, Redfern and Waterloo. They just want to gentrify everything and we’re the first.”

Tooher, who has a heart condition, was admitted to St Vincent’s hospital early last week. “If I’d been moved to live in Campbelltown, or Timbuktu, how could I have gotten to St Vincent’s?”

Carly, a single mother who has lived in the area for 21 years, said: “The media concentrates on harbour views and claims that people are paying \$40 a week. We don’t pay \$40 a week. There are people here paying market rents up to \$590 a week and in lots of the streets, as you can see, the tenants don’t have harbour views.

“We work together as a community, everyone looks after one another and we look after the elderly. People collect their medications for them, do their grocery

shopping for them, and take them to hospital appointments.”

Carly explained that 80-year-old women had fallen through the floors of their homes but NSW Housing did nothing about it. “The community comes together and puts in the little amount of money that it has and gets the floors repaired for them. Housing refused to do anything and has done no renovations or repaired toilets, walls or stairs for about 15 years,” she said.

“There’s been at least 33 houses that have been empty here for, I’d say, about 10 years. The government says it’s selling the properties to make money to build more housing for tenants on the waiting list, yet there are 33 empty homes here.

“I think it’s class distinction, definitely. People keep saying, ‘they’re in housing, they shouldn’t have harbour views’. Well why not? We’re still human beings. We’re still entitled to have a nice home. Why not?”

Carly, who lives with her mother, has a three-year-old daughter with spina bifida, a brain condition and epilepsy. “We just can’t afford private medical treatment for my daughter so I’m living here with my mother, who gives me support and we can get to the hospital,” she said.

“A lot of people have made comments that we’re scum and dole bludgers and things like that. I worked fulltime from the age of 16 until I was 27. I had two jobs and my mum has worked all of her life.

“To be able to afford to rent privately we’d have to move far from the city. We attend Randwick Children’s Hospital five days a week. [My daughter] sees physiotherapists, neurologists, spina bifida specialists, having blood tests, ultrasounds and MRIs.”

Construction worker Sergio Irusta said the privatisation was “unfair because people have been living here for generations, this is all they know... It’s all got to do with dollars. Years ago when this was a slum, people put up with what it was. Nobody came and tried to make them move. So why now the change?”

Maintenance was carried in his building, he said, until two or three years ago. “It’s a way of getting us sick of the place and think about going somewhere else. That won’t work for a lot of people, because they can’t go anywhere else. They’ve got no family. The only family they have is in this area.”

Sharon Shackleton, a 25-year Millers Point resident, denounced the media attacks on public housing tenants. “I’ve not heard in the media what happened to the \$42 million from the 30 properties that have already been sold. That didn’t go back into public housing.”

Shackleton commented: “If they can evict a whole community, then no section of public housing is safe.”

Molly Clark, who has lived in the area for 62 years, asked: “Do people know about or remember the ‘hungry mile?’ During the 1930s, 500 men would line up to get work [on the waterfront] but only three would get a job,” she said.

Clark said the area had high rates of cancer and that topsoil had to be removed from the local kindergarten due to the toxic lead levels. “Now, all of a sudden the wealthy want to live here. They didn’t want to be here when the wharfs were spewing out all sorts of smoke.”

Beverly Sutton said: “People assume that if we’ve been here for four or five generations that it’s generational welfare. But it’s never been welfare around here for these old families. Years ago if there was no work you had to rely on your family to help support you. There was no social service.”

Robin Hall said: “A lot of us have been here for five and six generations...If you go back 30 or more years there has never been a commitment by any government, regardless of who was in power, to put back into the housing stocks so that people could have somewhere decent to live... We are going to fight, of course, it’s what we do.”

Arun Mohindra, a disability pensioner, said the evictions could “kill a lot of people because they are too old or have health problems. Here people have their

doctors and specialists. How do they get to them if they’re sent anywhere else?”

Mohindra did not attend last Saturday’s meeting, because he was sceptical about the Labor Party, Sydney mayor Clover Moore and other politicians. “They only come here and talk, talk, talk and go back,” he pointed out. “Labor Federal MP Tania Plibersek starts to come around here now and says, ‘I will help you.’ But why didn’t they help us before?”



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