

Australia: Melbourne homeless continue city protest

Our reporters
6 June 2016

For the past three weeks about 30 homeless people have maintained a defiant occupation of a section of Melbourne's City Square, determined to highlight the plight of all homeless people.

The protesters want access to proper housing and accommodation and a 24-hour drop-in centre for the homeless established in the central business district (CBD). According to official statistics, over 140 people sleep on the streets each night in Melbourne's CBD.

The occupation, which began on May 12, has been maintained despite arrest threats, denunciations by the city council and a vicious vendetta by the local media.

Last month the *Herald Sun*, a Murdoch-owned tabloid, initiated a slander campaign against beggars and other people sleeping rough in the inner city, falsely claiming they were violent and anti-social.

In early May the newspaper devoted its front page and a double-page spread to a sensational story suggesting a homeless couple sleeping under a bridge were living a comfortable life at "one of Melbourne's best addresses." Throughout the month, the paper published various stories, claiming that beggars were not homeless and "bragged about how much they make."

Melbourne, the newspaper reported, was "beginning to resemble a third world ghetto." The homeless were jeopardising its reputation as the "most liveable city in the world." In other words, the visible presence of poor people was threatening the profits of tourist operators and retailers.

In an effort to whip up public opinion, former state Liberal Party leader and current Melbourne Lord Mayor Robert Doyle claimed most of those involved in the occupation were not genuinely homeless and the group had been infiltrated by outside agitators. "They may be homeless but they are protesters and so they'll

be treated like anybody else who is protesting," he said.

Three days later, in the early hours of May 20, council officers carrying formal "move-on" orders and assisted by police attempted to dismantle the protest, removing milk crates, tents, chairs and couches. The next day, a charity group that provides hot showers for the inner city homeless from a converted bus was issued with parking fines and ordered to move on. The shower bus had previously been allowed to park in the same location every week.

Those occupying Melbourne's City Square are just a handful of the thousands of homeless throughout Australia. For decades, Labor and Liberal-National governments, state and federal alike, have presided over an unprecedented redistribution of wealth away from the working class into the hands of the wealthy, while slashing spending on housing, health and welfare and privatising vital services.

According to recent statistics, over 200,000 households languish on public housing waiting lists. This includes at least 55,000 in New South Wales, 32,000 in Victoria, 22,000 in Queensland, 21,000 in South Australia and 2,310 in Tasmania. The systematic run-down of state-funded housing is compounding a wider accommodation crisis amid rampant property speculation. House prices in Australia, relative to average incomes, are among the highest in the world, with tens of thousands of families in housing stress.

Record numbers are now sleeping rough in Australian towns and cities as charities and under-funded government social services strain to meet growing demand for shelter and food from families, young people, pensioners and the unemployed.

By current estimates, more than 105,000 people throughout Australia are homeless. Thousands sleep on city streets or in cars and abandoned buildings on any

given night. Over 22,000 people are homeless in Victoria, most of them in the greater Melbourne area.

Homeless Australia reports that last year over 250,000 people throughout Australia sought assistance from homeless services. More than 70,000 of those were children, including 42,000 aged under 10. Over 90 percent of the unmet requests for accommodation involved a single parent with children.

Homeless Australia told the media its services were “at breaking point” and “communities across Australia will continue to see more and more people turned away from services and onto the streets.”

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s Liberal-National government provided no extra funding for overstretched homeless services in this year’s budget. In fact, the last three federal budgets have slashed \$674 million from housing and homeless programs. The only specific housing measure in this year’s budget allows state and federal governments to impose a Compulsory Rent Deduction Scheme on all welfare recipients.

In attempt to divert attention from Labor’s role in the growing homeless crisis during the current federal election campaign, Martin Foley, the state Labor government’s minister for housing and mental health, announced an extra \$750,000 to assist the homeless. This money, even if provided, is just a three-month extension of existing and grossly inadequate welfare programs and will provide no new accommodation.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with some of those involved in the City Square protest.

Lisa explained that the occupation started when the police moved two homeless people from a doorway where they were sleeping. This occurred at 6 a.m., and one of the men was crying and suicidal. She spoke scathingly about the Labor government’s promise to provide an additional \$750,000 for the homeless and estimated there were close to 200 people sleeping on the streets each night in the CBD.

“The promise is dodgy,” Lisa said. “It’s an extension of an existing program that would run for three months, not long term. They will put people in bed-sitters or rooming houses but there’ll be no long-term accommodation.

“People have to beg to get the money to get a room each night. To stay at a backpacker’s hostel you have to raise \$45 each day ... People are kicked off Centrelink [welfare payments] if they fail to turn up to just one

appointment, but some of them cannot make it.”

Lisa said the state government had sent welfare agencies, such as the Salvation Army and Launch Housing, to persuade the homeless to abandon their protest. They were offered temporary housing at Magpie Nest Housing.

“I told people not to go there,” she said, “because it was a dangerous place. They don’t comply with the building code. There are no locks on your doors and you have to pay for contents insurance out of your welfare payments.”

Kerian, who has been homeless for about a year, said homeless people faced difficulties accessing education and medical support. “The homeless still have regular medical appointments to keep, and the doctors and medical professionals are in the city, which means that some homeless people can’t live further out.”

John spoke about being constantly harassed by the police—day and night—and told to move on. “When we ask the police where we should go, they reply that they don’t care. ‘Just move on or you’ll be arrested,’ they say.” He said police harassment had escalated since the *Herald Sun* began its campaign against the homeless.

The author also recommends:

Australia: Homeless people speak on worsening social crisis

[12 February 2015]

Australia: Sydney city council attacks the homeless

[23 February 2015]

Australia: Public housing tenants face evictions

[11 November 2013]



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