

Melbourne public housing residents condemn Australian police lockdown

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In comments to the WSWS, public housing residents subjected to a “hard” police lockdown in Melbourne have spoken out against their treatment, branding it as unfair and exposing the lack of essential services provided by the authorities.

On Saturday afternoon, Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews announced that some 3,000 residents in nine public housing towers in the inner-city suburbs of Flemington and North Melbourne would not be allowed to leave their apartments for between five and fourteen days.

The unprecedented measure was necessary, Andrews said, to prevent the rapid transmission of the coronavirus within the crowded buildings, amid a surge in COVID-19 cases across the state.

While the towers were immediately flooded with around 500 police officers, tenants told the WSWS that basic necessities, including decent food, were not provided for days and that nothing had been done in the months prior to mitigate against the dangers posed by the pandemic.

Girmay Mengesha has lived in one of the Flemington towers since he migrated to Australia from Ethiopia in 2005. His experiences are typical of the attacks inflicted on the working class since the coronavirus crisis began.

Earlier this year, Mengesha was stood down by Qantas, the largest airline in the country, as it responded to the pandemic by pocketing hundreds of millions of dollars of government subsidies and laying-off thousands of workers. He is now employed by a major supermarket chain, but has voiced fears that he will not be paid for the casual shifts he is missing due to the lockdown.

Mengesha told the WSWS that he found out about the lockdown through a text message from Victorian health authorities late on Saturday afternoon. When he went downstairs “I saw so many police officers at the entrance of the building... I assumed they were there to arrest someone, that’s the only reason we expect to see a police presence.”

He told the police that he had no food. “Please can you give us the time to buy some groceries for the next two or three days at least, until something is provided for us,”

Mengesha asked. He was rebuffed by the police.

Many other residents were in the lobby: “A lot of them were so upset and confused and frustrated because, this part of the community, we don’t have a good history with the police, and when we see police, the first thing we feel is intimidated.”

Mengesha ordered food through Uber, but the delivery driver was not allowed into the building.

Only on Sunday afternoon was Mengesha permitted to receive a food delivery. “For almost 24 hours, until Sunday at 3 o’clock, I did not eat anything because they told us to stay at home, not to go to our neighbours or anything else,” he said. “If I didn’t go downstairs and ask them, they would never have told me that I could order food.”

Mengesha was given his first package of food from the authorities at 5 p.m. on Monday, fully two days into the lockdown. The government employees who made the delivery were not wearing any kind of protective equipment.

“Especially in the North Melbourne area, people were given a lot of products that had expired. They gave them cereal without milk. There was no bread at all. So it wasn’t well organised,” he said. Only on Tuesday did the food situation improve, coinciding with charity deliveries. Some food donations, however, were confiscated by the authorities.

Asked about the impact of the hard lockdown, the young worker stated: “The biggest part is the psychological impact, because we are not allowed to leave, even for fresh air. I heard one mother complaining when we were in the lift. She has two kids, and she said they have to give us one minute at least to allow us to get fresh air, or exercise, to stretch our legs. For adults, we can handle it, but for the young children it’s impossible and when they are screaming, crying, and asking so many questions and you cannot provide them answers, they get frustrated, they make us frustrated, and the stress level goes so high.

“For people who don’t speak English, they go downstairs, because there’s no communication from anyone. There’s no one in the building to give you accurate information.

There's no translators or social workers who can give you support.

"No-one is knocking on their doors to check on their well-being, just to ask 'how are you, what do you need?'"

Mengesha spoke about longstanding fears among residents that they were vulnerable to a COVID-19 outbreak: "Since the coronavirus started, we were always anxious. We already knew that if someone was infected in these buildings the spread would be dramatically high, but nothing was done. They put only one sanitiser in the lobby, and it was not refilled at all. One sanitiser for 20 floors, which is 200 houses, is just impossible. In terms of cleanliness, nothing changed."

He continued: "We were so worried all the time, and there was no translation of the flyers they provided about how to protect yourself. It was only written in English, and most of our community members, especially older people, don't understand English.

"We managed ourselves, the younger people, to organise translations for the community to let the community know how to protect themselves, how to keep social distancing, how to cover their mouths with a mask or a scarf, not to shake hands. For people in our culture, our greetings involve hugging most of the time, so we told them, 'you have to stop hugging until everything's alright.'

"But the most important thing is the lack of attention from the department of health, from the government, or from anyone."

Mengesha said that none of the residents were opposed to measures aimed at containing the virus. He noted, however, that it was only the public housing residents who were being subjected to a massive police mobilisation. Workers, such as himself, along with doctors and nurses, were being prevented from going to their places of employment.

"Instead of nurses, doctors, and social workers, they send us the police, which gives the wrong message among the community," he said. "The majority of the residents that I spoke to said they believe that the government is sending a message saying we are the community that didn't follow any direction from the government without the presence of the police, which is wrong. We are a capable community who can follow direction, who can think independently, and who look after the whole community without anyone's presence, especially the police."

Mengesha explained: "The role of the police in the area is just negative, to be honest, especially among the young people. It's not misunderstanding, there's intentional harassment of people. They don't give you a chance to explain yourself for any accusation that they put on you. To arrest one person for any reason, they come with full gear, like a SWAT team. Every day they come, morning and

night, to patrol the area. If they see us talking on the street or the basketball court, a group of people just chatting, they come and say 'what are you doing?'"

He added: "You have to understand people's background. When they came from overseas, they had experienced war, they had experienced torture by the police. The reason they came to Australia is to run away from all of this kind of stress. And the image that they have in their mind is not good in general. On top of that, when they come here, the police are almost the same as the people that they ran away from. The scar doesn't heal quickly, it's there forever."

Mengesha concluded: "The Andrews government should have prepared well, put social workers, nurses, interpreters, community leaders, professionals, to at least properly explain the plan. But what they did was not well thought out."

Dima Abdu, a student in one of the North Melbourne towers, similarly told the WSWS: "The police force coming in shocked the community, traumatised its people who come from different backgrounds, migrants coming from trauma, from war-torn countries. They've survived civil wars and come to a safe place. Then they wake up one morning to see a whole bunch of police downstairs stopping you from going in and out."

Abdu warned that some residents were not receiving medication. Speaking yesterday, she said that a diabetic man in the building had not been provided with a new supply of insulin since the lockdown began. "We have elderly who live in this building by themselves, who are usually visited by their children who live outside of the building who used to bring medicine and stuff," she said. "So now we struggle with the fact that these people may not get their medication on time."

She noted that translators had still not arrived at her building. Because of the poor planning, residents had been forced to go downstairs to collect state-provided foodstuffs, threatening ongoing transmission in the densely-populated towers.



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