

“I’ve been made to feel like a criminal, but I haven’t done anything wrong”

Melbourne public housing resident denounces Australian police lockdown

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Kat, a working-class stay-at-home mother, spoke with the WSWS on Wednesday about the situation confronting locked-down residents of public housing towers in Melbourne, Australia’s epicentre of the coronavirus pandemic.

On Saturday afternoon, the Victorian state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews announced that the 3,000 residents of nine towers in the inner-city suburbs of Flemington and North Melbourne would be subject to a “hard” lockdown.

Residents—who come from the most oppressed sections of workers, with many having migrant backgrounds—were surrounded by 500 police officers sent in to prevent anyone from leaving or entering the buildings. Tenants were starved of basic necessities and healthcare.

Only yesterday did Andrews announce the lifting of the restrictions on all but one of the towers. Cases among residents now stand at over one hundred. There are more than fifty confirmed cases in the one North Melbourne building that will remain under police lockdown for another nine days.

Kat explained that she heard of the lockdown from a fellow resident who received a text from health authorities which said a “lockdown would be in place effective about midnight” while they were playing with their toddlers in a nearby park.

After returning home, Kat and her friend “thought to quickly run to the shops and get some supplies before they lock us in. The police were already at the doors and not letting us out. When I asked about it starting at midnight, they said it’s effective immediately.”

Kat and her family were not contacted by the authorities until her partner received a phone call on Tuesday afternoon, during which “detention centre rules” were read out.

On Sunday, Kat called the health department, telling them that she has a toddler and was in need of nappies and milk. She was informed that “they would deliver food that night or the next morning. But the first bit of food we received wasn’t until Monday, 11 p.m., other than some sausage rolls that were left on our doorstep.

“But most of our building is Muslim, so most people couldn’t even eat that. I saw some of the stuff that was left for other people. Some expired in May, bags of prison slop. I realise that they’ve never had to do anything like this in Australia, but I still think it is being managed pretty poorly.”

The food, Kat said, included “a fair bit of fresh fruit and vegetables. But otherwise it’s mostly canned stuff. There are no proteins or anything like that, no butter. There’s so much canned food and pasta sauce. It’s just stuff that we and most of the people in the building don’t eat.

“Neighbours have been knocking on our door, bringing the stuff that they don’t want. If that’s not the best way to spread COVID, then I don’t know what is. I’ve been saying no at the door. I don’t want to offend anyone, I don’t want to accuse anyone of being sick, but at the same time it’s about being careful. So, there’s enough, you’re not going to die of starvation. Whether it’s nutritious or not, I’m not really sure.”

As of Wednesday, testing still had not commenced in Kat’s building, increasing the anxiety of residents.

Only on Thursday evening did Andrews announce that all tenants had been examined.

Like other residents, Kat said that she was provided with minimal information throughout the lockdown: “We’re getting frustrated not knowing what is going on, because you keep getting told that this is going to happen, and it just doesn’t... We want some real answers because no one is giving them to us.”

When asked if social and healthcare workers were present, Kat responded: “Nothing. Nobody except police. Tuesday was the first day anybody came through and cleaned the communal areas of the building. The hand sanitiser dispensers in the lobby have been empty for days, and the health department refuse to provide PPE [personal protective equipment] unless you have masks already. I don’t know why it took three days to get anybody to clean anything when you’re telling us that there are infections in the building.”

She added: “I was given a phone number for a doctor in Flemington who said there is supposed to be somebody here but there is no-one. Only police.”

The police presence included as many as seven officers at each of the three entrances to the building. “Some of them talk to you like you’re a human being,” Kat said, “but a lot of them are aggressive. I’ve been made to feel like a criminal, but I haven’t done anything wrong.”

Kat, who has lived in the flats since April 2018, said her building had some refurbishment work done, but the contract expired halfway. She said “when you go above around level 12—I’m on level 16—it’s pretty bad. The floors are unfinished. I don’t even know how you would sanitise it. There’s no linoleum or tiles or anything. The insides have all been redone, but the communal areas are trashed.”

She said “you don’t end up here because you have done very well in life. I ended up here because I was homeless when I was pregnant with my daughter. These are situations people can’t avoid.

“There are a lot of unaddressed mental health issues in these buildings. It is very difficult when you are in a bad state of mind to go and ask for help. People have already been throwing things outside their windows. It is going to come to a point where somebody is going to lose it.”

While there were confirmed COVID-19 cases in the

buildings, residents reported that sick people were not removed and treated at hospitals. “I’ve seen one ambulance in the last four days,” Kat said. “I’m sure they don’t really want to draw any attention to the cases. But I haven’t heard of anyone being taken away. Knowing that there are cases in our building, what are they doing with those people?”

The government’s police response, Kat said, has “a lot to do with the colour of people’s skin and the fact that we are of a lower social standing, which is disgusting. It’s 2020 in Australia. We’re a civilised country, this sort of stuff shouldn’t be happening here.”

On the impact of COVID-19 internationally, Kat said she had heard that there are 3 million cases in the US. She said, “I pity the people who have Trump as a president. It doesn’t look like anything’s being done to handle the situation. There was a little bit of isolation, but that’s all over now. Businesses are all open and everything’s back to normal, isn’t it?”

The WSWs interviewer explained that this was an international phenomenon, based on the “reopening of the economy” to shore up the profits of the wealthy and the murderous policy of “herd immunity.”

Kat said: “That is so disgusting. That’s all about that one percent looking out for each other, isn’t it? That makes me really angry.

“Like I was telling you, when I was watching these press conferences, he [Andrews] has this way of saying things like, it’s under control, or it has been thought about, and somebody gives a shit about us, you know. But the proof is in the pudding, and I am not seeing any of that proof trickling down to us.”



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