Melbourne public housing residents still outraged by Australian police lockdown

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Two more residents of the Melbourne public housing towers on which the Victorian state Labor government imposed a “hard lockdown” last week have spoken out via the WSWS to express their anger and opposition to the police operation.

On Saturday July 4, in mid-afternoon, Premier Daniel Andrews suddenly announced that the 3,000 residents of nine 20- to 30-storey towers in the inner-city suburbs of Flemington and North Melbourne would be confined by “detention orders” inside their cramped apartments.

On the pretext of stopping the spread of COVID-19, 500 police officers surrounded the buildings and were deployed to guard every floor and stop residents leaving their flats. For days, working class residents, many of whom come from refugee and immigrant backgrounds, were starved of basic necessities and healthcare. Households with many children and/or elderly and vulnerable members were particularly affected.

Only after a week—amid mounting outrage among the residents and throughout the working class—did Andrews announce the partial lifting of the restrictions on all but one of the towers. The residents of that block, 33 Alfred Street in North Melbourne, remain locked in their small poorly-ventilated flats.

Last Saturday, to add to the inhumanity of the police operation, wire fences were erected around that building, supposedly to permit the residents to exercise in what resembled a prison yard. Such was the disgust and anger among the residents and their supporters that the fences were removed early on Sunday morning, shortly after midnight.

It is now clear that the Labor government’s operation was not only brutal. It failed to curb the spread of COVID-19 throughout the public housing estates. In fact, by detaining the residents inside their buildings, where social distancing was impossible, the government ensured that the contagion intensified. Entirely predictably, shared corridors, lifts, laundries and rubbish facilities, poor ventilation and plumbing have worsened the spread.

By Sunday, 237 cases had been detected across the Flemington and North Melbourne estates, and another 28 cases had been confirmed among residents of public housing in nearby Carlton, another inner-city suburb. Health authorities say up to 25 percent of the 472 residents living in 33 Alfred Street itself may have been infected with the virus.

Emel is a Kurdish-Turkish immigrant and working-class mother of two young children. During her interview, conducted in Turkish, Emel told the WSWS that she received no official notification of the police lockdown of the Flemington flats where she lives. “Five minutes after I heard about the lockdown on the news, the building was surrounded by police,” she said.

Emel expressed frustration at the long delay before any supplies were delivered by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). “On the second day we received the first batch of food,” she said, “I didn’t know it was coming—I heard about it on social media.”

The food was left on the ground floor. “There are 180 families in our building and we don’t know who has the virus and who doesn’t,” Emel said. “Everyone has to use the lifts to go down to pick up the food. This means the virus—in this small, crowded building—is going to spread.”

Emel said many families had dietary requirements, which were not considered. Her family, which has gluten intolerance, managed by avoiding the bread and other food items, “but some families have very serious diabetes concerns and the food packets were not

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prepared with these in mind."

Emel explained that "these buildings aren't fit for people to live in under normal circumstances, but under the conditions of the coronavirus and the lockdown, they have turned into hell. There is no clean air or sunlight. The rooms are small. The building is not clean… It is like a prison."

Denouncing the government response, Emel said: "We have had no healthcare or social workers in our building." It took doctors until the Wednesday to test residents for COVID-19.

"Why was there such a strong police blockade here?" she asked. "The first thing that came to my mind was that this was the Australian and Victorian governments showing through us that they were on track to becoming a police state. This is class war. They wouldn't do this in a rich suburb like Toorak or Kew. This is a poor, migrant, refugee community. Our incomes are the lowest in the country. They want to make us look like trash."

Emel continued: "Many of us come from Africa, the Middle East and we know what police violence, police states and military states are. So many of my neighbours are asking me: 'Why are the police here?'"

Emel said the police lockdown had "nothing to do with a fight against the pandemic. This is not and cannot be the way to fight against the pandemic. The struggle against the pandemic has to be scientific and transparent. It cannot be done by sending 500 police here. It is done by sending healthcare workers, social workers, psychologists."

When the WSWS asked Emel what she thought about the spread of COVID-19 internationally, she denounced the governments' back-to-work campaigns. "In every country, they said to workers that they should self-isolate for 14 days. But then they sent all the workers back to work. Workers, who have to bring bread home, are forced to go to work… This is true for Australia and everywhere in the world—the pandemic most affects the workers…

"We could shut down the whole world for a month, but we are not doing this, because the profit-hungry corporations will not allow it… For them, workers will go back to work, the virus will spread and people will die. They don't care."

Noting recent findings of doctors and scientists, Emel said: "They are now saying that the virus can stay in the air for longer and travel… Everything outside of what is essential for people to survive should be shut down… All of the lost jobs and incomes of the workers have to be compensated. Nowhere in the world has this happened and it won't happen."

The WSWS spoke over Reddit with a first-year university student who wished to remain anonymous. His family fled war-torn Somalia and lives in one of the North Melbourne flats. He said they learned of the lockdown via text message and it "was not communicated before the police arrived. No prior notice at all, so you could imagine the shock of people running low on supplies."

He said the DHHS "provided us with one sachet of culturally inappropriate food for my family of 9. It came on the second day at 11pm… It was thrown onto the floor." The teenager said there was "no healthcare or social workers' presence or communication" and it "was hard for us not to feel like caged dogs."

When asked about the confirmed cases in the buildings, the student said: "It is quite appalling that those [who have] tested positive aren't being removed to a different area. Instead they go back to pressing the buttons of lifts and touching common areas... I'm not surprised that almost 100 cases in the last few days have been found so far in just the towers alone."

He added that the towers were targeted for a police crackdown because they are in "a much poorer area" and "lots of us are immigrants."

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