Australian state government forcing 2,000 residents from inner-Sydney public housing

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In what is being falsely presented as a housing "renewal," the New South Wales (NSW) Liberal government is nearing the final stages of a $3 billion redevelopment project in Waterloo, an inner-Sydney suburb. Australia's largest city, Sydney was ranked last year by the Economist Intelligence Unit as the 10th most expensive city in the world.

The privatisation project, which means massive profits for developers, will force approximately 2,000 residents from the Waterloo South housing estate to leave their homes by next year, if not sooner. It marks a new stage in the decades-long bipartisan assault on public housing by federal and state governments, Liberal-National and Labor alike.

Waterloo South makes up 12 hectares of the 19-hectare Waterloo Housing Estate, first built in the 1970s and only four kilometres from Sydney's central business district. The rest of the estate, which includes Waterloo North and Waterloo Central, is also to be redeveloped, forcing residents to relocate in the coming years. Redevelopment of the entire estate will impact on around 3,000 residents.

In March 2022, the *Australian Financial Review* estimated that Waterloo South's total land value alone would be "more than $1 billion" and, according to real estate agents surveyed, it will "have a gross development value of $2 billion or more."

According to an Independent Advisory Group report in 2019, over two thirds of Waterloo Housing Estate residents are over the age of 50, just under 10 percent have a "higher level of need for assistance" with day-to-day activities, one third are on the disability pension and one quarter on the aged care pension. They have been given no clear idea where they will be relocated to during the project's construction or after.

The first redevelopment proposal for the Waterloo housing estate was released in 2016, but dropped after strong opposition and protests from residents and the Sydney City Council. The current plan, which was drafted in May 2020, has been through multiple revisions.

Last month NSW Planning Minister Anthony Roberts declared that the plan was about "breathing new life into an old social housing estate." Translated into plain English, the plan is an acceleration of the ongoing decimation of public housing to boost the profits of banks, property developers and the construction industry at the expense of working-class residents.

While the government, media, and developers claim the new Waterloo development will ease the current housing crisis it will do no such thing.

According to figures cited by University of New South Wales Professor of Housing Research Hal Pawson in an article for the *Conversation* last May, social housing waiting lists increased by 16 percent to 164,000 people between 2018 and 2021.

Pawson said that the current waiting time is 10 years before being assigned a home, resulting in over 6,000 cancelled or withdrawn registrations. He pointed out that total social housing capacity has been cut in half since the 1990s.

The NSW government claims that 3,012 new homes will be created in Waterloo South, ranging across four high-rise buildings and dozens of mid- to low-rise buildings.

The proposal, however, only includes 28 percent social housing, 8 percent "affordable housing," and 64 percent private properties. Waterloo South currently has 86 percent social housing, with the number of privately-owned dwellings rising under the redevelopment from 120 to 1,938, a ten-fold increase.

"Social housing" is an umbrella term used to conceal the fact that for all intents and purposes Australia has no ongoing public housing program. It includes public housing, community housing, and Aboriginal housing.

Community housing, which constitutes the majority of "social housing" are rentals owned or operated by non-government organisations in which residents receive subsidies from the government. Community housing rents are usually higher than public housing and given to those on higher incomes.

"Affordable housing," which was initiated by the Rudd federal Labor government in 2008, subsidises landlords who provide rental accommodation 20 percent below the prevailing market rate.

According to realestate.com.au, the median weekly rental of a one-bedroom apartment in Waterloo is $560. While the "affordable housing" rate would therefore be $448, the maximum payment rate for a single person on the disability pension is $513 a week, leaving just $65 for food, utilities, medicine and transport. And these impossible rents will continue to rise.

CoreLogic research director Tim Lawless told the *Guardian* that rents in Sydney increased by 15.5 percent in the year to last November. CoreLogic's December report found that medium to high density rents (which Waterloo South would fall under) rose by 13 percent and that profits from rentals nationally increased from 3.21 percent in February to 3.71 percent in November.

The current housing crisis is the intended outcome of decades of

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deregulation and privatisation policies and attacks on basic social rights by all the major parliamentary parties, aid and abetted by the trade unions.

The Hawke and Keating federal Labour governments of 1983–96 introduced cash subsidies for welfare recipients unable to find public housing, directing them into the private sector and establishing the pro-market reforms that were to be deepened by subsequent governments.

Between 1990–91 and 2000–01, Labor and Liberal governments, at state and federal levels, cut real capital funding for public housing by 25 percent. This continued throughout the 2000s and by 2010 nearly a quarter of a million households were on public and social housing waiting lists.

Since taking office in 2011, the NSW Liberal government, with bi-partisan support from Labor, has sold off over $3 billion worth of social housing properties and in the past five years sold $9 billion worth of government land.

In 2014, it began privatising prime inner-city public housing estates, selling 293 publicly owned homes for 99-year-leases at Millers Point near the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Hundreds of working-class residents, some of whom have lived there for generations, were evicted.

In June 2015, NSW Labor opposition leader Luke Foley called on the state Liberal government to consider handing over the state's entire public housing stock to the "not-for-profit" sector.

A year later the Liberal government released *Future Directions for Social Housing in NSW*, a 10-year plan. Its stated aim was to "transform the social housing system" in NSW from one dominated by public sector ownership to "a diverse system characterised by a greater involvement of private and non-government partners…"

This means handing over all remaining public housing assets to the finance, property development and construction industry to further enrich themselves. In 2020, 64 of Australia's richest 250 people were property moguls, headed by Meriton chief Harry Triguboff who increased his wealth from $12.31 billion to $15.5 billion in the previous 12 months.

Several inner-Sydney public housing residents spoke last weekend with the *World Socialist Web Site* about their plight.

Sally, a resident of "Waterloo North" since 1987 said: "I feel the government doesn't give a stuff about us, which they don't. When you call the property manager and ask for maintenance it is a new person every week and the maintenance workers that they send are now young people who don't know what they are doing.

"My stove was broken, they sent six people out, none of them could make up their minds what was wrong, they were going to send a seventh and I said what's the point? There were cockroaches everywhere and I rang for months, and nothing happened. Then I rang a politician and that day the client office called me and said, 'you've rung a politician,' and they got it cleaned up."

This is a common experience in the Waterloo Estate and for public housing tenants across the state. Requests for maintenance are systematically ignored by government authorities as part of a deliberate process of demolition by neglect. Dwellings are allowed to become so run down that restoration becomes almost impossible and the properties are sold off to private owners.

"I don't want to live in a concrete jungle," she continued. "When I first came here it was 80 percent housing commission. Now, if I walk five minutes up the street, I am in yuppie land. Redfern Street is now all little night clubs and cafés, which doesn't do anything for us."

A "Waterloo South" resident explained that because he now has a job, he must pay over $500 a week rent. "I'll have to go into the private market," he said, and added that he knew of at least 20 other residents that would have to do the same. Many residents will probably be forced to move out of the area to try and find cheaper residences in Sydney's outer west and south-western suburbs.

Whichever party wins the forthcoming March 25 NSW state elections, it will continue the assault on public housing and the working-class and low-income residents.

Last December, Labor opposition leader Chris Minns addressed the right-wing Bradfield Oration gathering. Hosted by Murdoch's *Daily Telegraph* and supported by Crown Resorts, Australia's largest gambling and entertainment group, and big business player, Minns called for infrastructure expansion. He pledged that a future NSW Labor government would streamline "planning" into one ministry.

Minn's remarks were immediately hailed by the Urban Taskforce, Australia's leading lobby group for property developers and equity financiers. Minns' speech was "spot on," Urban Taskforce CEO Tom Forrest declared and, in a pointed complaint against the current NSW Liberal government, said "vacant government land exists across Sydney and only now is starting to be considered for development."

The fight for affordable high-quality public housing and basic social rights can only be advanced if workers and residents organise independently of the existing parliamentary and trade union framework. Decades of appealing to federal and state government to change course have not stopped any of the assaults on public housing.

Residents need to take matters into their own hands by establishing tenants and neighbourhood action committees in alliance with construction, utility and other workers to fight for socialist policies and a genuine workers' government.

Such a government would nationalise the banks, finance houses and property industries, putting them under public ownership and democratic workers' control. The massive wealth accumulated by billionaires, property developers and financial speculators must be redirected to meet social need, not private profit.

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