

Australian Greens stage housing protest at Labor Party conference

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At a Greens rally outside the Australian Labor Party national conference in Brisbane last Saturday, the party's housing spokesperson Max Chandler-Maher demagogically denounced the Labor government's response to the worsening rental and housing crisis.

The Greens parliamentarian declared that Labor "acts more like the party of the banks and property investors, than the party of the worker." He criticised the Labor-dominated "National Cabinet" meeting three days earlier for refusing to support a temporary freeze on rents. "While the banks make record profits, renters cop record rent increases," he said.

At the end of his speech, Chandler-Maher called on the 300 or so people present to march around the Brisbane convention centre complex in which the conference was being held, "to make our voices heard inside."

The political agenda behind this protest event became clear when this reporter asked Chandler-Maher how the Greens would vote on the Albanese government's totally inadequate affordable housing fund bill when it returned to the Senate in October.

"That depends on the negotiations with Labor," the Greens MP replied. In other words, the Greens are still anxiously seeking a deal with the government, having already offered a rotten compromise back in June.

As far as the Greens are concerned, demonstrations like the one last Saturday are part of their deal-making tactics with Labor. Such protests are also an electoral bid for votes from renters, who make up a third of the population, in order to divert their outrage back into the safe channels of parliament.

Labor's proposed \$10 billion Housing Australia Future Fund is a sham. The Albanese government claims that the fund, to be invested on the share market, would contribute \$500 million a year to build "up to"

30,000 social and affordable homes over five years. Even if that were to eventuate, depending on the volatility of the stock exchange, it would be a drop in the ocean compared to the mounting need, and would not see a single home built until 2025.

According to research reports, Australia's shortfall in social-housing dwellings exceeds half a million and is set to be nearly three quarters of a million over the next decade, adding to the years-long waiting lists for urgently-needed homes. At the same time, rents and home mortgage interest rates are soaring, threatening millions of working-class households with acute financial stress and evictions.

Initially, the Greens called for direct government spending of \$5 billion each year, saying that was essential to eventually end the affordable housing shortfall. In June, they halved their proposal to \$2.5 billion a year—far too little even by their own standards. Chandler-Maher said they had "bent over backwards" to reach an agreement with the Albanese government.

The Greens also urged Labor to offer the state and territory governments \$1 billion in incentives to enact a two-year freeze on rents and adopt rent caps. Chandler-Maher told the rally this would save renters more than \$3 billion a year.

That is inadequate as well. Over the past four years, rents nationally have increased by almost 40 percent on average, from \$459 per week in August 2020 to \$642 per week this month. The vast majority of properties are now unaffordable for workers, even "essential" workers like nurses and teachers, let alone people depending on welfare payments or aged pensions. Homelessness is rising, and there are many reports of people living in cars, vans or tents, and relying on charities for food aid.

For all Chandler-Maher's rhetoric, the Greens have

repeatedly offered further concessions in their negotiations with the Labor government. In July, Chandler-Maher told the *Sydney Morning Herald* the Greens were willing to settle for any increase above \$500 million a year from the housing fund, and for minimal rent caps. “Everyone’s heard us say, bottom line, we want unlimited rent increases to be illegal,” he said.

However, the Albanese government’s rejection of even these sops was made plain at Labor’s national conference. “Left” trade union and “Labor for Housing” representatives dropped their token calls for a super-profits tax to fund the affordable housing shortfall and welcomed the outcome of the “National Cabinet” meeting.

That meeting of federal, state and territory government leaders—all Labor but one—rejected any rent freezing or capping, or any other policy to address the rental crisis. Instead, it unveiled measures to sweep aside planning and building regulations in order to further boost the fortunes of the property developers, banks and the other financial institutions which dominate the housing market that has created the crisis.

That response demonstrates that only a socialist program can resolve the housing disaster. A workers’ government would redirect the massive wealth accumulated by the billionaires and financial speculators, and the billions being spent on war, to public housing, health, education and other critical social programs. It would place the banks, finance houses and property industries under public ownership and workers’ control.

The Greens are deeply hostile to such a program, and are no less committed than Labor to defending the capitalist profit system itself. Behind Chandler-Maher’s bombast, they are seeking a closer partnership with the Albanese government in the face of growing discontent with its program of war and austerity.

Over the past few decades, the Greens have become a pivotal component of the Australian political establishment. Their pitch for a housing deal echoes their vote last year for Labor’s legislation to reduce greenhouse emissions by only 43 percent by 2030—far from what is essential to avert irreversible global warming.

Just before Chandler-Maher addressed the Greens’ demonstration outside the Labor conference, a similar

protest event served as a reminder of the role of the Greens in propping up Labor governments, such as that of Julia Gillard from 2010 to 2013.

Former Greens leader, ex-senator Bob Brown, spoke at a rally against Labor’s support for the continued logging of native forests. “The people inside here are not listening,” Brown declared.

Yet Brown and other Greens leaders bear central responsibility for Labor’s political survival. Brown signed a de facto coalition agreement with Gillard in 2010 to supply the votes for Labor to form a minority government. The Greens maintained their parliamentary support for Gillard’s government as it committed itself to the US military and strategic “pivot to Asia” to confront China, including by rotating US marines through the northern strategic city of Darwin.

For all their posturing on rents, the Greens are a capitalist party, rooted in sections of the affluent upper middle-class. Workers and young people who want to fight war, social inequality, environmental destruction and the Labor-led onslaught on living conditions should turn to the socialist and internationalist perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party.



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