

Australian community support worker speaks on surge of homelessness

Our reporters
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The Australian working class confronts a deepening social crisis on multiple fronts. The cost of living continues to rise, with the price of basic goods and services such as food, fuel, housing and utilities increasing even more rapidly than the official 4.1 percent inflation rate.

Real wages, on the other hand, have plummeted. Over the past three years, wages have fallen by an average of 5.1 percent compared to inflation. Tens of thousands of jobs have been cut in recent months, pushing unemployment to a two-year high, while overtime and rostered hours have also been slashed to boost corporate profits.

Half of all homeowners are now in mortgage stress, partly as a result of 13 interest rate rises ordered by the Reserve Bank of Australia since April 2022 with the backing of the federal Labor government. This has increased repayments on an average home loan by more than \$1,500 a month.

In 2023, rents increased by an average of 7.3 percent. Advertised apartment rental prices went up by 18 percent, putting enormous financial pressure on those looking to move and young people entering the rental market for the first time.

One of the sharpest expressions of this crisis is a surge in homelessness. By one estimate, more than 1,600 people are becoming homeless each month. Increasingly, this includes people who are in paid employment.

World Socialist Web Site reporters recently spoke with a community support worker in south-eastern Melbourne, Victoria, who has worked for almost a decade in various emergency relief organisations.

She said there had been a “dramatic increase,” especially in the past two years, in the number of people with “no fixed address. They’re either couch

surfing, living in their cars or in tents down on the foreshore.

“I’ve worked with clients who have held jobs, people that are employed, but are living in their cars. Going back a few years, seven out of eight people I saw would have been on government benefits. Now, I’d say easily half are working.

“It doesn’t take much to go from having a job and paying rent to becoming homeless.

“You’ve got a job, you’ve been in it for a couple of years and everything’s fine, but then you get a rent increase and you didn’t get a wage increase. Now you’re calling on services like ours, maybe just for food relief.

“People get in a lot of trouble with their utilities—they might skip a couple of bills and think ‘I’ll be okay’, then it all catches up. In Victoria, there is a utility relief grant scheme, but if you’re working, you don’t get access to any of that. You also don’t get access to a healthcare card, so you can’t get cheap medication, so you’re choosing between medication and food, or rent. It’s just insane that people have to make those kinds of choices.

“It doesn’t have to be this major life changing event, it can be something small like a health problem. You get sick or injured and you run out of sick leave. Or you have a car accident where you’re at fault and have to pay the excess. People don’t have savings. You get behind on your rent, you get evicted, end of story.

“To get any assistance with rent, there’s a big process, a lot of bureaucracy. It’s especially hard if you’re unwell and in hospital. There are social workers in hospitals that do help with these things, but they are extremely busy and there is only so much they can do. People can slip through the cracks very easily.

“I remember one client, a mother with a school-aged

child. Her rent was around \$520 a week. She was working full-time, but then had to go into hospital for a very simple procedure. She was meant to be in and out the same day, but there were complications and that didn't happen. She couldn't go back to work, so she got behind in her rent. In that case, we were able to step in and help, so they didn't end up homeless, but that's how easily it can happen.

"There are a lot of people who work in hospitality and personal care who are at risk of homelessness. They are working just to cover the rent and then having to rely on homeless services for food and other things.

"I remember one family, and there were others like them, who had to choose between food and petrol—they couldn't afford to put petrol in the car to take their children to school every day. They lived some distance from the school and we don't have the best public transport down here. Then there's the cost of school uniforms, textbooks, school shoes, etc. A lot of working parents will go without meals to make sure their children have something to eat. We have seen a big increase in this demographic."

The "face of homelessness" is even more starkly exposed in central Melbourne, the worker said: "There are so many more people living on the streets, begging on the streets. More than I've ever seen in my whole life.

"During the COVID lockdowns, there were rent freezes and a moratorium on evictions, but people were still getting into rent arrears. As soon as those safety nets were lifted, it was an opportunity for landlords to evict people. Now, rents are at an all-time high.

"Also, the cost of living, food, petrol, mortgages and interest rate rises all contribute to what we're seeing now.

"There is a lack of affordable housing and public housing. I am in public housing myself, but if I was not a disabled single parent that would not be the case. The [non-priority] waiting list for public housing, I've been told, is 25 years. If you are single, you will never get public housing in your lifetime; it won't happen, it's as simple as that.

"No government has been willing to tackle the public housing crisis. They all pay lip service, wring their hands, but nothing gets done. But the federal government is willing to spend all that money on nuclear-powered submarines—it's beyond belief."

The worker explained that the organisations tasked with providing assistance to the homeless and at-risk are heavily dependent on donations: "It always baffles me how much fundraising you have to do, especially for places like a community centre, because governments at the state and federal level keep cutting your funding. You go in with all your case studies and paperwork and everything and they just keep cutting. It means that there are limits on what can be provided, how often clients can call on us for support.

"The disparity between the classes is obscene to me. Around here, you could go anywhere on the foreshore and there'll be a homeless camp, yet 10-15 kilometres up the road, people are flying their private helicopters. The two houses on either side of mine are sitting empty—they're holiday houses and are very rarely used. There are enough resources for everybody, but they're not shared equally and the government does not want to share them equally.

"As well as housing, health should be a basic right. If you've got a health issue, it should be treated no matter how much money you have, or where you live. Education too.

"Under the current political structure that we have, there will never be equality, and the working class will pay the ultimate price. We saw that with the [COVID] pandemic, an attitude from governments at all levels that a certain amount of the population was disposable, that is was okay to lose those lives if everybody else went back to life as normal and were your worker bees.

"With the Gaza genocide, it's even more open. The whole government has no compunction about mass murder. The policies that Labor has for the Palestinians are basically what it has in store for us here."



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