

Public housing residents speak out against planned tower demolitions in Melbourne

Our reporters

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Public housing residents in Melbourne recently spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about their fight to halt the state Labor government's planned demolition of every high-rise public housing tower in the city.

Three towers in the inner-city suburbs of Flemington and North Melbourne are slated to be the first destroyed. The Labor government signed a \$100 million contract with property giant John Holland for the demolition, planned for late next year.

The lucrative land sites will be redeveloped with two-thirds privately owned apartments—creating a bonanza for property developers—while just a third will be reserved for so-called social housing. This is a far less secure, and more expensive, version of public housing, outsourced to non-government organisations. Thousands of residents will be displaced, many of them refugees and other vulnerable sections of the working class, who rely on various services and community organisations developed around the towers.

The Labor government's agenda represents an enormous assault not just on the residents themselves, but on the entire working class and the basic principle of public housing provision (see: "Australian state Labor government plans to demolish 6,600 public housing units").

Hundreds of residents in the Flemington towers have brought a class action lawsuit against the government, on the basis of human rights violations. Government lawyers refused to disclose documents purportedly outlining why the apartments could not be refurbished. Independent architects have insisted that refurbishment is entirely viable. The court case reconvenes later this month.

Khalil, a taxi driver originally from Eritrea, shared his insights on public housing: "For new migrants, for refugees, for newcomers, till they settle down and get a job, this was very helpful, especially for refugees from Africa, Afghanistan, and the Middle East. I came to

Australia in 1988 and lived in public housing in Ashburton for almost four years, then I bought a house in Endeavour Hills. I believe it is very helpful for many people, and as you know, the marketplace is very expensive and not many people can afford it, especially families."

Khalil discussed the uncertainty faced by residents. "They are not very sure of what is happening," he said. "There is a bit of uncertainty. There is some advantage to living here, they are established, their children go to school here. They are well connected to this area, and it will be very hard for them to move somewhere and re-establish themselves, especially with high rental prices.

"In general, I think the government wants to get rid of the housing commission establishments forever—this is capitalism at work. Australia has been a very good country for migrants, many people who have been in the housing commission have established themselves and their kids, and now are doing well for themselves. The concept of housing commission must continue because it helps people to settle down until they can stand on their own."

Sam works casual hours as a security officer and cannot work at full capacity due to a medical condition. "I've lived in public housing in Richmond for the past 12 years," she explained. "Once I was living in a unit with my friend, then I had to wait for a unit for three years. During that time, I had to look at private rentals which were just unaffordable for me. Every time I looked for a place, they raised the price. With my medical condition, I couldn't climb stairs. It was difficult.

"Public Housing [authorities] came to me this year with the information about demolition. I'm very upset because many elders in the community don't want to move out, but they have no voice. They're told they will get better houses, but this is not true. Some who have been relocated have said their new homes are smaller, with one and a

half bedrooms, and not suitable for them. As long as it's all public housing, we're all happy. We should be making more public housing, newer homes. Taking it away from us, especially when many of us don't work, is very unfair."

Sam spoke about the deliberate running down of public housing apartments: "I've got spine problems and heart issues that have worsened since I started worrying about what's going to happen to my home. The laundry door hasn't been fixed for years, washing machines are damaged, and water leaks through the floor. The government uses these issues to say the buildings are unsafe and must be demolished. But why don't they fix it instead? We need more public housing units, not fewer."

Kadir, an Ethiopian worker currently unemployed due to injury, has lived in the Flemington flats for seven years. He said: "The government has not told me where to go. I don't want to go anywhere else. They shouldn't be demolishing public housing. The people living here support each other. Some of them, like me, can't work or have trouble moving around, they rely on others for support. Now that we have to move out, it's going to be very difficult for them."

Deniz, originally from Cyprus, has lived in Flemington public housing for 26 years. She shared her concerns about the government's plans: "It's not right to put us in social housing. That's not fair on humans. We are human, we should have human rights. There are many elderly residents here who have lived in their homes for 30 years. They're moving people from two-bedroom flats into one-bedroom units, and those are not housing commission. I don't understand the problem. I'm speaking for myself: How much longer am I going to live? I can't let them take away my comfort."

Salma, a refugee and resident of Flemington for 10 years, expressed her frustrations about poor maintenance of the public housing units: "Maintenance is very, very poor. If you call them today, they will come three months later. It's not the maintenance team's fault, it's the public housing offices that never instruct them to do the jobs. Maintenance used to be better. Back in 2015 and 2016, they would come within seven days. Now, I've been waiting for my fan to be fixed for three months."

She continued: "Everyone should fight for our rights because we all belong here. I have the right to stay because I grew up here, and most people have been living here for over 20 years. But the government is not listening to us. We have the right to stay, and the workers should help us with that. We need more workers and more people

to speak for the residents because many feel trapped and are scared to say anything to the government. They are very scared. We do need help, and we need more people to work and advocate for us."

Gabriel cares for his 83-year-old mother, who has lived in the flats for over 50 years. He expressed his concerns about her situation: "They've offered her a place that was unsuitable. She has a letter that says she has to be out at the latest by this time next year. I come over and do shopping for her. I live in North Melbourne, so it needs to be close. She wants to stay near her medical care. My mum isn't too impressed. She'd like to stay. They've told us it's a maintenance issue; they claim there's a problem with the oil heaters and that they can't put air conditioning in, which I somewhat understand. But the building itself is pretty good, it's sturdy."

Kate is a long-term resident of one of the tower blocks that is slated to be demolished in 2025. She said: "How do we explain how we are affected? We are devastated. We can't even sleep. Some of us have had to go to hospital. We don't know how we're going to end up. They are abusing us. We are worried, crying, depressed. They separate us and don't care."

Kate explained the pressure being exerted on residents to accept relocation, often to outer suburban homes. "My Homes Victoria worker, I told her I don't want to see her," she said. "They are all so arrogant. If you say you don't accept what they offer you [regarding relocation], they say you are losing your choice. They say they'll take you to court. I'll be the last person there."

"They say they'll build better houses for us. It is lies, they destroy us completely. They don't know what anxiety they have caused. They force you to go from two-bedroom down to one-bedroom. People have so many issues due to this dislocation. You can't sleep at night. Where are our grandchildren going to be tomorrow? My daughter works in the city. They offered her a house in Wyndham Vale (an outer western suburb 40 kilometres from Melbourne). We want to move close by—my children and grandchildren go to school nearby."

"We've been living here 25 years, this is our home. I am a good tenant. I should have rights to stay."



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