

Impoverished Sydney boarding house residents face imminent eviction

Our reporters
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The imminent eviction of up to 30 mostly aged residents from boarding houses in the Sydney suburb of Paddington, some of whom have lived at the property for over 50 years, highlights the housing disaster facing the most vulnerable layers of society amid a broader crisis afflicting the entire working class.

Property owner, developer LFD Developments, has notified all residents of the Selwyn Street boarding houses their power will be cut off and locks changed on February 1. LFD plans to turn the properties into four luxury houses.

LFD purchased the buildings in 2022 reportedly for \$10 million. The properties had previously been under the same ownership for 95 years and used as residential chambers since at least 1918.

Paddington in 1920 was a working-class suburb, described by a health inspector as a “disgusting slum” and the “worst place to live in I have ever seen.” Today the average price of a house in what has become a high-end suburb is over \$3 million, with unit prices close to \$1 million. Median rent is \$1,350 weekly for a house and \$700 for a home unit.

The Selwyn boarding houses were built as cheap housing after World War I for returning soldiers. They currently contain 32 mainly single rooms with a community laundry.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to 75-year-old Ray Reading, a triple stroke and double heart attack survivor, who has lived in one or other of the rooms at the terraces in Selwyn Street for 45 years. He moved into his current single room with a tiny balcony kitchen when the previous resident died. He expects to be out on the street come February 1.

Ray explained: “The old owners never told us they were selling. We haven’t been told of any accommodation that’s available when we are thrown

out of here. I can’t go to a high-rise because I can’t go up or down stairs.

“I pay \$150 a week rent which leaves me \$400 a fortnight to live on. I have never missed a week’s rent. You don’t get much on the pension. I need a lot of medication, you can see how much I have to take. You go to the butcher, you’re gone before you leave the butcher shop.

“We’ve had the federal government, the state government, the local government, the Greens all come around to have their photos taken and they have given us nothing. The state minister for housing, Rose Jackson, has sent people around here this morning because she is nervous about all the publicity we’ve been getting, but we weren’t even told there was a meeting on. They’ve just turned up for something to do. I think they stink. If it was their families, they’d be in here like a shotgun. They all ought to be taken out of government. The developer is confident they can evict us because they’ve got the money.

“The government is the cause of the housing shortage. I’ve worked all my life as a truck driver. The government does nothing for the worker.

“I’ve made a lot of friends in the 45 years I’ve been here. I started out in the storeroom and I moved in here after the former occupant died.

“I’ll end up on the street, I can see it coming. There are people living in these boarding houses with full time jobs, they’re going to be homeless.”

A community support group has been set up to oppose the evictions. Its online petition to the City of Sydney Mayor, Clover Moore, has been signed by almost 20,000 people. Dwellings in Selwyn Street and neighbouring streets are displaying banners protesting the evictions.

In an attempt at damage control, NSW Labor

Housing Minister Rose Jackson has written to Moore, “confirming the State’s intention to co-invest with the City of Sydney if and when the developer is prepared to sell for a fair price” according to The Paddington Society, a community and heritage group.

These declarations have the character of damage control. Neither Jackson nor Moore offered an estimate of what they regard as a “fair” price, the term “co-invest” is deliberately vague and the developer LFD has rejected the offer.

Both Jackson and Moore had previously washed their hands of any responsibility for the evictions. Property website Domain reported Jackson as stating “the decision-making process for the privately owned boarding house is beyond our control.” For her part, Moore declared the matter was not within her purview and hit out at the NSW government for its “woefully out of date state planning rules.”

The developer is currently in the Land and Environment Court (LEC), appealing the decision of the Local Planning Panel (LPP) to reject their development application. The LPP’s main reason for the rejection was the loss to the City of Sydney of affordable housing stock, which “remains very low at 0.76 per cent of total housing stock.” However, a spokesman for the community action group, Michael Mannix, expressed the fear that even if the appeal to the LEC was disallowed, the owners could let the boarding houses run down until there was no other option but to knock them down.

Furthermore, the LEC hearing has been delayed until May while the residents will be forced out on February 1, providing the owner with vacant possession and the tenants with little hope of ever returning to their homes of many decades. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the council has advised they will “consider legal action after the boarding houses are closed, not before.”

Decades of funding cuts by Labor and Liberal have reduced public housing to a tiny fraction of dwellings. A recent Impact Economics and Policy report for the national peak body Homelessness Australia revealed that in 2022, there were between 2.7 million and 3.2 million Australians at risk of homelessness, a 63 per cent increase between 2016 and 2022. Advertised rental prices doubled from 2020 to 2024.

An Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS)

report stated, “Australia has the worst rental affordability on record and one of the highest rates of homelessness among wealthy countries. Australia’s supply of social housing is at a four-year low.”

According to a March 2024 media release by the Community Housing Industry Association (CHIA), the social housing waitlist in New South Wales (NSW) is the longest in the country with almost 58,000 families and individuals waiting for help. An additional 300 joined the waitlist the previous month. Mark Degotardi, CEO of CHIA, said, “Every single day, 10 families are joining the social housing waitlist. At that rate, the state government needs to build more than 3,600 social homes a year just to keep up with the increase in people needing help.”

The federal Labor government has pledged to develop only 30,000 “social and affordable” dwellings across the country. The state Labor government is demolishing what remains of the public housing stock in the inner-city suburb of Waterloo. The housing policies of both are entirely geared to providing tax and other incentives to developers and removing “red tape” that could hinder their profit-making activities.

The housing crisis poses the need for a reorganisation of society to meet the needs of ordinary people, not the insatiable demands of the banks, the corporations and the developers. That means a fight for socialism against Labor and the entire political establishment.



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