

Australia: Form rank-and-file committees to halt Labor's demolition of public housing towers in Melbourne!

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)

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The Victorian state Labor government's planned destruction and effective privatisation of 44 public housing towers is a major attack on the most vulnerable sections of society and on the entire working class. If this assault is not defeated, some 10,000 residents will be displaced from their homes, public housing will be on its deathbed and the housing crisis afflicting all working people will deepen.

Labor is carrying out the demolition at the behest of, and in the interests of, big business. The transparent aim is to force the poor out and hand over most of the land on which the towers are located to property developers, who stand to make a fortune from selling lucrative inner-city apartments.

Only a small portion of the new dwellings will be set aside to purportedly meet social need. But they will be "social housing," which is often more expensive and less secure than public housing. Social housing, administered by non-government organisations, is simply another route to the privatisation of public housing stock. The vast majority of the residents face the prospect of being scattered to the four winds, cut off from communities that have developed over decades and from amenities and services upon which they rely. Some will inevitably become homeless.

This operation has been carried out behind a veil of secrecy and lies. Labor has hidden how much money it will hand over to the property developers. It has flooded residents with misinformation, claiming there is no alternative to the destruction because of the rundown state of the towers, despite independent architects having issued a detailed report proving the viability of refurbishment.

The plan is very far advanced. Last year the Victorian Labor government signed a \$100 million contract to demolish the first five of the 44 towers. Already, numbers of residents have been forced out to clear the way.

Despite the late hour, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) insists that the demolition can and must be defeated! There is immense anger among residents. The destruction has no mandate or popular support. It is a conspiracy involving the governments and the financial parasites who have profited from the housing crisis afflicting all ordinary people.

But to fight this, residents must get organised. The SEP calls for the formation of residents' rank-and-file committees. These can be a vehicle for breaking the isolation imposed by the government, sharing information and planning a counter-offensive against the

demolition.

Above all, such committees can and must make a powerful appeal to broader sections of the working class to halt the demolition, including through protests and industrial action, including strikes. Powerful forces are involved in the attack on public housing residents. To defeat them, a greater power, the strength of the working class, must be mobilised.

The critical question is of political perspective. The SEP states bluntly that appeals to governments to change course are worse than a waste of time. The perspective of pleading with the governments responsible demobilises residents and workers, covers up the class issues at stake and blocks a genuine struggle against the demolition.

Court actions, moreover, while they may be legitimate, are no substitute for the independent action of residents and workers. Despite class actions having been launched, the Labor government has been able to proceed with its destruction operation unhindered. The courts, like the government, are ultimately an instrument of the capitalist state, beholden to the same corporate and financial interests behind the demolition of the towers.

Definite political forces are responsible for peddling these bankrupt positions. They posture as friends of the public housing residents, but they are the falsest of friends. Their real role has been to cultivate illusions in the government, thereby preventing a fight against it.

That includes the Greens, which have held several meetings ostensibly opposing the demolition. Their line was summed up by state parliamentarian Samantha Ratnam, who said: "I implore the once great Labor Party to return to their roots as a party that serves the people, not corporate interests, and builds rather than destroys public housing."

What a fraud! Labor is the premier party of "corporate interests." And in its role as an unalloyed instrument of the banks and the corporations, it has led a privatisation agenda for decades, directly overseeing or facilitating the sell-off of transport, telecommunications, finance and virtually every area of social utility.

Labor's demolition of the Melbourne towers is not an aberration, but part of a nationwide offensive. At the federal level, the Albanese Labor government has rejected all appeals to reverse the massive decline of public housing stock. His government aims to

build just 30,000 social and “affordable” dwellings over five years, when experts state that the shortfall of social and public housing is already more than half a million.

Albanese’s administration has backed the thirteen interest rate hikes by the Reserve Bank of Australia, driving up the average mortgage by more than \$1,000 a month. Its other housing policies include direct handouts to property developers for apartment construction and the continuation of all the tax breaks that have helped to fuel the speculative property bubble.

In New South Wales, the state Labor government is carrying out a near-identical demolition program targeting public housing in the inner-Sydney suburb of Waterloo.

This is a class war agenda in the interests of the ruling elite and directed against the working class.

Ratnam and the Greens know all of this. They are covering it up, because the Greens, whatever their occasional posturing over social issues, are a capitalist party themselves. The highest aspiration of the Greens is to enter into capitalist government. That is why the federal Greens last year teamed up with Labor to pass its pro-developer housing legislation and why Greens leader Adam Bandt is declaring his willingness to enter a formal alliance with Labor after the next election.

A pernicious role is played by fake-left organisations such as the Victorian Socialists and Socialist Alliance. They have collaborated closely with the Greens, promoting the same line of protest politics oriented to the government. That is exactly the same role as they have played in the protests against the Israeli genocide in Gaza. For well over a year, the pseudo-left has subordinated all opposition to the massive war crimes to appeals to the Labor government, which is politically, diplomatically and materially backing Israel.

The pseudo-left’s promotion of protest politics in both cases is not a mistake. It is because these organisations, while falsely claiming to be socialist, are tied by a thousand strings to Labor and the political establishment.

Their aspiration was summed up in a Victorian Socialists statement, which declared, “a socialist in parliament could be a voice for the struggles of ordinary people both inside and outside of parliament. Yelling at Liberals in the Senate in the morning, speaking at a rally in the afternoon...” That is, the pseudo-left wants a place in the corridors of power, where they would collaborate with Labor in the morning, and shout bankrupt slogans at protests in the afternoon.

Above all, the pseudo-left defends the corporatised trade union bureaucracy. The unions have not done a thing to oppose the demolition of the towers, or the privatisation of public housing generally. They are in a complete alignment with the Labor governments implementing this agenda. And just as they greenlight attacks on housing and privatisation, so too do the unions enforce cuts to workers’ jobs, wages and conditions.

This shows that a fight to halt the demolition requires a movement of the working class, independent of and opposed to Labor and the union bureaucracy. An appeal must be made to construction and other workers to block the demolitions, including by taking strike action in opposition to the union leadership. Such an appeal should come from residents’ rank-and-file committees,

pointing to the shared class interests between public housing residents and all workers, against austerity, growing social hardship and for the social right to decent and affordable housing for all.

The SEP proposes as initial demands to be fought for by residents’ rank-and-file committees:

- Halt the demolition! Hands off public housing! Invest public funds to upgrade and refurbish all public housing.
- Expropriate vacant investment properties that are being hoarded for profit—make these available to the homeless.
- Cap rents and mortgage repayments to 25 percent of a family’s income.
- Allocate billions for the construction of new high-quality public housing to provide for those currently on waiting lists and everyone in dire need of secure housing.

These demands will not be won through plaintive appeals, but in struggle. They require the mobilisation of the broadest layers of workers. That includes public sector workers in Victoria and across the country, who are being hit with wage caps beneath the soaring cost of living, and layoffs, to pay for growing budget deficits. It must include public housing residents across the country, such as in Waterloo, who confront an identical demolition operation.

The housing crisis is one of the starker expressions of the reality of capitalism: a society organised entirely in the interests of the billionaires, at the expense of working people, who produce all of the wealth. While masses of people cannot afford a secure dwelling, or are driven into poverty by surging rents and mortgages, hundreds of billions of dollars are made by the banks and the property developers profiting from this social misery.

In other words, this is a fight against capitalism, and the alternative is socialism. The rule of the rich, through Labor, parliament, the state and the official media, must be brought to an end. The working class must take political power and reorganise society to meet its needs. The banks and the corporations should be placed under public ownership and democratic workers’ control, and the hundreds of billions wasted on the wealthy, and on militarism and war, redirected to public housing, healthcare, education and other social necessities.

To fight for this, a revolutionary, socialist movement of the working class must be built in Australia and internationally. We urge residents to contact the SEP to discuss establishing rank-and-file committees, and these broader political issues.

Attend our upcoming public forum in Melbourne! Titled “Build a neighbourhood defence committee against public housing towers demolition!” it is being held Sunday, March 16 at 2 p.m. (AEDT), at Kensington Neighbourhood House, 89 McCracken Street, Kensington. Register here.



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