

Neighbourhood Action Committee established to fight Labor's demolition of Melbourne public housing

Our reporters
21 March 2025

The Socialist Equality Party organised an important forum in Melbourne last Sunday to initiate the formation of a Neighbourhood Action Committee to fight against the state Labor government's planned demolition of 44 public housing towers.

The meeting was held in Melbourne's inner north, close to housing commissions in Flemington and North Melbourne that are the first slated for demolition and privatisation. Labor's sell-off of 44 towers in Melbourne is a major attack on the most vulnerable layers of the working class, threatening approximately 10,000 residents with displacement.

Residents from towers around Melbourne attended the forum, both in person and online. Other attendees were former public housing residents, as well as other workers and young people outraged by the state government's assault on public housing.

Patrick O'Connor, a member of the SEP's National Committee, chaired the event. In his opening remarks, he emphasised the international and historical context of the fight to defend public housing. He reviewed the unprecedented crisis in the United States, including the Trump administration's turn to dictatorial forms of rule on behalf of the corporate oligarchy. This is only the sharpest expression of a global political shift, with powerful sections of the ruling elite promoting the most ruthless and anti-working class political parties.

"Australian capitalism is in no way immune from this tendency," said O'Connor. "The ruling class is promoting extreme right-wing and fascistic layers, while the Albanese Labor government, together with its state Labor counterparts, is engineering historic declines in working-class wages and living standards. It is also undermining basic democratic rights and cosying up to the Trump administration as preparations accelerate for a war of aggression against China."

He continued: "In order to successfully take forward the fight against war, for democratic rights, for decent jobs, wages, and conditions, and for the provision of adequate social services—including the provision of public housing as a basic social right—workers must break with the entire political establishment and strike out on a new road. We have organised this forum not only to discuss and analyse the situation but to outline a perspective for action, for the mobilisation of public housing residents and the working class more broadly through neighbourhood and workplace action and rank-and-file committees."

Peter Byrne, who works as an architect and has been an active member of the SEP for more than four decades, delivered the main report. Byrne explained that the Victorian government's plans to end public housing were part of a wider assault on the entire working class.

"It is not just a direct attack on the people who will be evicted from their homes, but is a wholesale attack on the social rights of the working class and the fundamental principle that providing a home for everyone in society is the responsibility of the government."

Byrne exposed Labor's lies that the towers are rundown and therefore fit for destruction. He analysed a recent report by independent architects, explaining that the towers can in fact be refurbished to provide quality public housing. Such refurbishment would, the architects found, cost less than Labor's demolition proposal.

Byrne emphasised that Labor is a party that defends corporate interests. "Victorian governments, Labor or Liberal, like their state and federal counterparts, have already privatised public transport, telecommunications, banking, energy utilities, in fact almost everything. Nationally the Albanese Labor government is playing the same role. Its agenda is to suppress wages and boost big business, while telling us that they are concerned about the cost of living."

While overseeing the largest fall in living standards in half a century, Byrne continued, "Albanese has committed to spending \$368 billion for US nuclear powered submarines to prepare for war with China. At every step of Israel's genocide in Gaza, Labor has defended Israel while moving to outlaw any opposition to the genocide."

Byrne emphasised critical issues of political perspective. Political forces including the Greens and the pseudo-left organisations, Victorian Socialists and Socialist Alliance, have sought to cultivate illusions in the Labor government. "The SEP states bluntly that appeals to government are pointless," Byrne said. "By pleading with Labor, as has happened with the Greens marches and meetings on public housing, the Greens and fake left are demobilising residents and workers, and covering up the class issues.

"What the SEP proposes is very different. We are fighting to build a movement of the working class, independent of and opposed to the Labor Party and the trade union bureaucracy. We urge this committee to turn out to the working class, and to directly appeal to construction workers to block the demolitions, including by taking strike action in opposition to the union leadership. That is the importance of this neighbourhood committee and independent rank-and-file committees."

The main report was followed by an important discussion, in which several public housing residents threatened by the demolition plan spoke about their experiences.

A Somali woman, speaking through an interpreter, spoke about her concerns that there would be little local housing provided for those forced to relocate, with people forced to move to outer suburban areas far from the community networks established around the towers.

Another woman originally from Africa spoke about the impact on children in the community, with their education threatened with disruption if they have to change schools. A single father with two children also raised this issue, and condemned the government for its lies about the state of the towers and the potential for refurbishment.

He and other residents spoke passionately about how the government's

demolition agenda would smash up communities that have developed close bonds over decades, including childcare arrangements and mutual aid services.

Supporters of public housing attending the meeting also spoke at the forum. An independent architect who has been reviewing the government's plans spoke about the damaging environmental impacts of the planned demolitions, including the unnecessary release of significant levels of greenhouse gasses through the project. Others raised questions about what the next steps were in the fight to defend the towers, and made different suggestions for the Neighbourhood Action Committee to consider.

Through the discussion, several friendly amendments were made to a draft resolution presented to the Forum, and it was passed unanimously.

Titled "Build a Neighbourhood Action Committee against the demolition of public housing towers!" the main section of the resolution stated:

We resolve to establish a Neighbourhood Action Committee that must be independent of all pro-business political parties and organisations, including the trade union bureaucracies, the Greens and the various fake left organisations that promote futile efforts to appeal to and pressure the Labor Party.

The Neighbourhood Action Committee will provide a forum for democratic discussion and debate over its future actions, as well as presenting accurate information to counter the propaganda campaign conducted by Labor and the media. This Committee will make a sustained appeal to the widest layers of the working class, the community and families, and all those who oppose this historic attack on public housing. Public housing is being privatised as part of a broad assault on the working class imposed by the Albanese Labor government, an assault on education, health and all social spending.

An appeal must be made to construction and other workers to stop the demolition, including by strike action in defiance of the union leadership. Such a call should come from the Neighbourhood Action Committee, emphasising the shared interests of public housing tenants and all workers and youth in the fight against austerity, rising social misery and the social right to adequate and affordable housing for everyone.

Noor, originally from Somalia, has lived in Australia for the past 20 years and grew up in public housing. He delivered a prepared speech supporting the formation of the committee: "I'm appalled to hear about the demolition of these buildings without any consultation with me and my community!" he explained. "Homes Victoria [the government body tasked with the demolition] say it's the 'new way forward,' but what new way forward?

"Public housing is completely different from social housing, let alone private homes. We were told these towers were permanent buildings. My community has not moved away from these areas for the last 50 years. We built communities here. We built a mosque near the North Melbourne towers, and a community centre. Now we've been told to leave."

Noor also spoke on the 2020 police operation that penned residents of the Flemington and North Melbourne towers in their homes after COVID-19 cases were detected. At the time, the SEP condemned this "lock-in," explaining in a statement: "What is needed in Melbourne is a genuine public health response not a massive police operation. No explanation has been provided as to why 500 police were deployed to flood the buildings, not doctors, health workers and counsellors."

Noor told the forum: "They just locked us away from society. That

experience made me believe that we are viewed as third- or fourth-class citizens, who are not as important. It was a government that was not willing to consult ordinary people. And now we're witnessing the same thing, from the same Labor government.

"Everything comes down to capitalism. Everything comes down to 'how much money can we make from these buildings, how much can we extract from these people.' To get the rich to be richer, and us to be poorer. And that's what made me want to come to this meeting. I'm willing to join the fight against this."

Other attendees later spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters about their views on the Labor government's assault on public housing.

A resident who has lived at the Kensington public housing towers for six years said: "I'm worried about what is in the future, I have anxiety and depression."

She said the area is "very good... I don't want to move anywhere."

The resident denounced the Labor government's action, which has been taken "without consultation, without any background or anything."

When asked why the government was demolishing the public housing towers, she said: "Maybe it's for profit. Maybe it's their way of letting us be homeless."

"I was homeless before," she said. "I can't be homeless again. It will deteriorate my health. I don't have anywhere to go. This is my home, my shelter, my life. ... But as a social right, we don't need to move anywhere. We are here for good."

The resident said the SEP's call for a neighbourhood committee to fight back against Labor's plans was "very good." She added: "We have to oppose it."

Another attendee, **a doctor**, is not a public housing resident but said he "heard from my colleagues about the demolitions that are occurring across Melbourne and the wide-ranging impact this will have on up to 10,000 people."

"This represents a significant assault on communities, with no clarity as to what will happen to them afterwards and a lack of consultation."

"This is an opportunity for profit-driven programs to construct private housing to the detriment of public housing, with the midway-house—inadequate as it is—of social housing taking a greater part of non-private housing."

"It's a strategy that Labor is using to benefit corporate interests. They're not really standing, as they would claim, for the people."

The doctor said the assault on public housing was part of a broader attack on the living conditions of the working class in Australia: "We can look back decades. We don't have to look at just what's happening now. But this is an accelerating, consistent trend in the assault on the working class. These things are being eroded."

About the forum, he said, "What was presented today is a number of viable alternatives which have not been considered, including the environmental impact."

"I think that the meeting was consultative, it was well presented, it included a lot of data to refer to, and proposed a constructive way in which we can include those affected and those who are interested in helping."

"A structured way that's an alternative to what would seem to be futile placard-holding and pleadings with the parties that don't seem to have any interest in changing their approach."

The forum concluded with an important discussion on the Socialist Equality Party's campaign against the Australian Electoral Commission's antidemocratic refusal to register the party for the upcoming federal election. O'Connor, Byrne, and other SEP members in attendance spoke on the significance of this attack on the democratic rights of all workers, and urged public housing residents and supporters to join the campaign.

We urge all public housing residents throughout Australia, and supporters of public housing throughout the working class, to join and

become active within our Neighbourhood Action Committee. Contact us today!

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