

Political lessons of the defeated court challenge to Melbourne public housing demolitions

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As one of the Socialist Equality Party's candidates in the federal election, I condemn the recent Victorian Supreme Court's dismissal of a legal challenge brought by residents of several of the towers that have been targeted by the state Labor government for demolition and privatisation.

The judgment, as the *World Socialist Web Site* has reported, served as a demonstration of class justice. Residents were effectively told that they had no right to a home, no right to be consulted prior to the government decision to obliterate their communities, and no right even to have access to secret government documents used to justify the public housing sell-off. The government, it was made clear, has free rein to take whatever measures it wishes with regard to public housing, regardless of the devastating impact on thousands of families, including refugees, single parents, and other vulnerable layers of the population.

Public housing residents and the entire working class must draw sharp political lessons from the legal case—above all else, the urgent need to mobilise against the threatened demolitions through the Neighbourhood Action Committee that was established last month by a group of residents, with the active support of the Socialist Equality Party.

It is entirely legitimate for public housing residents to seek every opportunity within the legal system to challenge the government and its destructive agenda. However, countless historical examples in Australia and internationally demonstrate that legal battles for civil and social rights are effective only to the extent that they complement, and are ultimately subordinated to, the active mobilisation of working class people from below.

A different perspective animated the Supreme Court case. The lead plaintiff in the legal appeal was a former

Greens party candidate for local council, and the Greens promoted the court challenge in the state parliament and publicly. Residents were told to place their hopes for a reprieve from eviction in the court system. The Greens have since said nothing, beyond state party leader Ellen Sandell's comments reported by the Australian Associated Press (AAP), that the outcome was "disappointing" but that the "fight was not over."

All of this is so much hot air. The Greens have no intention of fighting anything, including the destruction of the public housing towers. Their so-called campaign, to the extent that there is one, consists solely of moral appeals to the state Labor government to change its mind and reverse course.

That serves to conceal Labor's character as a ruthless representative of big business and the banks, and to subordinate opposition to the destruction of public housing to the very party that is carrying it out.

That is not a mistake on the part of the Greens. No less than Labor, they are a party of the political establishment that defends the domination of private profit over social need.

That has found concrete expression on the issue of housing. On the last day of federal parliament in December, the Greens joined with the Albanese government to pass Labor's housing legislation.

In doing so, the Greens dropped all of their phony demands, for an increase in social and public housing, for rent caps and other palliatives that they advance to win support. Instead, they voted for measures handing millions of dollars to the same property developers benefiting from the destruction of public housing by the state Labor administrations.

Now, amid the federal election campaign, the Greens entire pitch is for a coalition with Labor. That is, the

Greens are signalling their support for Labor's housing policies, which are premised on an end to public housing, further handouts to the developers and attempts to maintain the ultra-inflated housing prices, to the benefit of the banks and the billionaires.

After the Supreme Court ruling, one of the lawyers involved in the residents' case told AAP: "They have been passionate about asserting their legal rights and committed to this process—it has been the only recourse available to have their voices heard." This was Louisa Bassini, who has previously stood as an election candidate for the pseudo-left organisation Victorian Socialists.

Bassini's statement that the legal system is the only avenue for residents to have their voices heard is false from start to finish. The courts ultimately function as instruments of the capitalist state, serving to uphold and advance state power and corporate profit accumulation.

The fact that the Victorian Socialists are covering this up, underscores the fraudulent character of their own election campaign. Its entire thrust, virtually indistinguishable from the Greens, is to peddle the sham that the powers-that-be can be pressured to grant concessions on housing and other essential social questions.

Notably, while the Victorian Socialists are seeking to win electoral support by peddling this reformism on housing, they have said virtually nothing about the planned destruction of the towers. That too is not accidental. It expresses the fact that this is a party of the affluent, inner-city upper middle-class, that is utterly indifferent to the plight of the most oppressed sections of the working class.

In opposition to all of these political traps, the SEP is explaining that residents need to themselves mobilise through the Neighbourhood Action Committee, turning out to other sections of the Australian and international working class. Action committees of public housing residents need to be established on every estate and within every working class community.

These committees need to send delegations to speak with meetings of different workers, such as builders, teachers, healthcare workers, public sector workers, as well as youth in the schools and universities. The broadest discussion must develop on the necessity for the entire working class—the only social force that can stop this wrecking operation—to urgently intervene in defence of the tower residents.

In a statement issued earlier in the federal election campaign, I explained:

Secure, high quality, and affordable housing ought to be a basic social right for all. But this right will never be granted by the capitalist class and its political hirelings in parliament—it must be fought for!

Ample resources exist to provide public housing for all who need it. These resources, however, are hoarded by the ultra-wealthy oligarchy at the top of society. Governments of all stripes, Labor and Liberal, have committed hundreds of billions of dollars to nuclear submarines and other instruments of war that are being readied ahead of the planned US-led attack on China, and which have already been directed to imperialist conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza.

An internationalist and socialist perspective is not some far off ideal, but rather the only practical program for the working class today. A workers government will liberate the productive forces of society, organise economic life not on the basis of maximising profit but rather satisfying social need, and oversee a massive redistribution of wealth to workers, youth and the oppressed.

I again extend the warmest support for and solidarity with the Neighbourhood Action Committee and urge all public housing residents, and other supporters of public housing, to join its ranks and step up the fight against the Labor government's destructive privatisation drive.

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