

Australia: Parliamentary inquiry legitimises public housing tower demolition in Melbourne

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The Legal and Social Issues Committee of the Victorian Legislative Council has set up an inquiry into the proposed demolition of 44 public housing towers by the Victorian state Labor government, to report by December.

The inquiry is a thinly disguised exercise in defending the Labor government's decision to smash up the tower residents' homes and communities.

In September 2023, it was announced by outgoing Labor Premier Daniel Andrews that all the 44 housing towers, located in gentrified inner suburbs of Melbourne, would be demolished and the valuable land ceded to developers to rebuild high-rise housing for profit.

There are 10,000 working-class residents who will be displaced. The rebuild will accommodate 19,000 residents in private apartments. Only 11,000 social housing positions will be included, as a bridge to overall privatisation. Public housing with security of tenure will be eliminated.

The inquiry has already held two public hearings and will hold more in the coming two months. The investigating panel that interrogates the witnesses comprises three Labor members of parliament, two Greens MPs and either two or sometimes three Liberal MPs. The first session was chaired by a Labor MP and the second by a Liberal MP.

The first public hearing was held on June 24 near the Flemington estate in the inner north of Melbourne, and the second on July 1 near the South Yarra estate in the inner south-east of the city.

Despite the intimidating adversarial framework, and the relentless demands of their personal lives, residents of the towers giving evidence were able to bravely insist that they did not want the towers demolished and the communities destroyed.

Reem Yehdego, a North Melbourne resident, said: "These demolitions don't feel like progress, they feel like erasure." She explained that relocation officers pressured residents of her block to move, saying they had to accept whatever offer they were given.

Yehdego noted that the estates were valuable real estate. "Now they are becoming gentrified, so the government and

developers are seeing it as a cash grab."

Ruth Eyakem from the Flemington estate said: "Please leave this public housing as it is. Now all of a sudden they come and separate us everywhere. That is a big mental issue for us."

Katherine Ceballos, a Carlton high-rise resident, said: "I come to save public housing. I come to save the land. I come to save the system." She accused the government of "trying to kick out minorities" from the inner-city suburbs.

Moriah Bouradanis, who accompanied Launch Housing, explained that she had been homeless before obtaining a public tower flat, and that it had become her sanctuary.

John Lowndes from Park Towers in South Melbourne insisted: "We're more than buildings, we're a community. Dismantling these buildings erodes this invisible infrastructure."

The Labor government is claiming that the towers are virtually derelict and beyond repair, so that the only viable path is to tear them down and send the current residents into social housing elsewhere.

After the initial hearing, where Labor members put forward this lie as best they could, it was clearly advanced to the media by Housing Minister Harriet Shing, who said: "These ageing towers will not stand the test of time—we have to act now. Victorians deserve better than Band-Aids on 1960s concrete."

This lie had been refuted comprehensively in a report by independent architects from the OFFICE organisation. Their analysis found that the towers are sound and that it would be possible to retrofit them to meet modern energy and sustainability standards, costing far less than the demolition. The residents could stay in place or return quickly.

The OFFICE report was given short shrift by the government, which did not want to hear this well-reasoned argument.

At the inquiry, the sort of witnesses that the government did want to hear was exemplified by two representatives of the Southern Better Health Network on July 1. This is a community health provider, which is partly funded by

Homes Victoria, the body legally responsible for the demolition project. The money is to further “awareness raising” and to “support self-determination” for residents in the South Yarra block, set to be demolished in Tranche 2 starting in 2026.

The demolition is the premise for the work that this organisation does in persuading the predominantly elderly residents to relocate at the behest of Homes Victoria.

One of the Labor members, Lee Tarlamis, then took up a theme that fellow Laborite Ryan Batchelor had pursued in the earlier Flemington session—that of “misinformation and fear out there” being supposedly spread by non-government forces.

The Better Health Network witness responded that there were “leaflet drops under people’s doors that had false information.” He added that “there were people loitering and following people into the building.”

His fellow worker interjected “that some of our role at the local level is actually myth-busting.”

The Laborites were keen to get hold of some of the supposedly offending leaflets. They are worried about the substantial opposition that is building towards the demolition program. They recognise that they have to try and derail this opposition.

Meanwhile, the Greens on the panel act as a cover for the Labor government’s policy. Their orientation is one of supposedly holding Labor to account and forcing a change of course.

While they claim to oppose the demolition, the Greens’ perspective is that testimony at the inquiry will pressure the state government of Jacinta Allan to alter its decision. In the same way, they promoted illusions in the recent class action in the Supreme Court by residents against Homes Victoria. This avenue resulted in a victory for Homes Victoria, and showed that the perspective of courts and parliamentary inquiries is not a way forward for residents but a diversion from it.

Largely, the Greens MPs confined themselves to points demonstrating that the residents’ human rights are being breached, which is incontestably true. However, one of the main aspects of the Supreme Court case ruling was that the judge found that while residents’ human rights are being undermined, Homes Victoria had no legal duty to uphold them.

Aiv Puglielli and his fellow Green Anasina Gray-Barberio kept returning to the theme of whether the residents were being informed of the fact that they would be relocated to social or community housing, which does not have the security of tenure of public housing and is more expensive. This was fobbed off by the assertion that residents were told.

The general tenor of the Greens’ questions was to contain the discussion to flaws in the implementation of the policy, rather than opposition to the overall demolition that the residents were trying to assert. In this respect, they served to diminish the impact of the testimony of the residents.

This overall result allows the Laborites to posture as being concerned about the minute details of the implementation of the process of dispossessing the residents from their homes, and also twists any criticisms of the upkeep of the towers by Homes Victoria into justifications for the towers’ demolition.

In other words, the proceedings are weighted against revealing the social crime against the working class underway. The Laborites on the panel remain unchallenged and can determine that the inquiry does not threaten their program.

The gist of this program, which the resident correctly termed a “cash grab,” is to impose the burden of austerity onto the backs of the working class, in order to further the interests of the property developers and corporate investors.

What this requires in response from the residents, and from the working class more widely, is not appeals to the government but a political struggle against it.

Residents should form rank-and-file committees throughout the towers, to share information, defeat the government lies and prepare united action to save their homes. Such committees should make an appeal to construction workers to defy their union leadership and institute black bans on the towers, and more broadly for a general fight by workers against the domination of the housing sector by the property developers.

That poses the need for a socialist perspective aimed at reorganising society, by placing the banks and the corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control, and ensuring the right of all to decent, secure and affordable housing as a fundamental social right.



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