

The CFMEU's phoney opposition to the demolition of Melbourne's public housing towers

Paul Bartizan, Martin Scott
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The Victorian state Labor government is prepared to carry out the biggest destruction of public housing in Australia's history. All of Melbourne's 44 public housing towers are to be demolished as part of the government's plan to drive the working class and poor out of the inner city and hand the lucrative sites to private developers.

Some 10,000 residents will be displaced from their homes. Communities built up over decades among the most disadvantaged sections of the working class, including refugees, single mothers and the elderly will be smashed up and scattered to the four winds. The real but unstated motives of the Labor government are to privatise public housing, reduce state debt and deliver a boost to the property development industry whose interests the government represents.

This operation is already at an advanced stage. Five buildings are set to be razed this year, of which two have already been emptied. More than two-thirds of residents have been driven out of the other three, and the Labor government has already provocatively begun preparatory demolition work.

The situation is urgent, but the destruction of the public housing towers can and must be stopped! This will require the mobilisation of building workers, as well as other sections of the working class, against the Labor government's offensive.

There are strong currents of support for such an initiative among building workers, many of whom are themselves current or former public housing tenants. But this will find no expression as long as workers remain within the grip of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU) bureaucracy, which will do everything it can to block a fight by workers against the demolition.

In an attempt to posture as a defender of public and

affordable housing, the CFMEU leadership has made certain criticisms of the tower demolition plan, including in its February submission to a state parliamentary inquiry. The union's submission makes clear that it does not actually oppose the destruction of 6,600 homes, merely pleading with the Labor government to perform a more thorough cost-benefit analysis to determine whether "the long-term cost benefits of retrofitting outweigh the short-term benefits of demolition."

The CFMEU submission has nothing to do with defending the interests of the towers' 10,000 working-class residents—the destruction of whose homes is dismissively noted as a "social cost" that can be "mitigated" through "community consultation."

Instead, the union is spruiking the business opportunities that would arise, should Labor elect to renovate, rather than demolish, the towers: "Environmentally retrofitting the remaining high-rise buildings presents a unique opportunity for the Victorian government to position itself as a leader and innovator in this space."

In August last year, the federal Labor government placed the CFMEU under quasi-dictatorial control, immediately sacking hundreds of elected union officials and delegates, under the fraudulent pretext of sweeping out connections to organised crime.

The administration is a major attack on the democratic rights of building workers and the broader working class. Its purpose is to further suppress the struggles of workers, not just for decent pay and conditions, but against the deepening social crisis being overseen and enforced by Labor governments at state and federal level.

But the contradiction between the CFMEU bureaucracy's occasional posturing on public and affordable housing and its cosy relationship with the

Labor Party are by no means new phenomena that have emerged only under conditions of administration. This was on stark display at the August 2023 national Labor Party conference in Brisbane.

Before the conference opened, the union's national secretary, Zach Smith, addressed a crowd including around 1,000 building workers, vowing to "make the big end of town pay for social and affordable housing." He claimed the CFMEU was fighting for a corporate super-profits tax to raise the funds needed to overcome the country's social and affordable housing crisis.

Inside the conference, however, Smith moved a toothless motion calling merely for increased "government investment in social and affordable housing with funding from a progressive and sustainable tax system, including corporate tax reform."

That is, within a few hours, Smith had both diverted working-class anger over the housing crisis into appeals to the government presiding over it, and reassured the corporate and financial elite that their vast profits were safe. Smith was quickly rewarded for carrying out this swindle with a position on the Labor Party's national executive.

In May 2024, the CFMEU and other building industry unions joined Labor for Housing—a grouping inside the Victorian Labor Party—in putting a motion to the state Labor conference, which did not in any way oppose the demolition plans, merely calling for "significantly more than a 10 percent uplift of social housing dwellings across the 44 sites."

While this was rejected, Labor for Housing claimed victory as the government agreed to adopt a "ground lease model," meaning the land would not be sold, but leased to the developers for 40 years then returned to public ownership, even though nearly two-thirds of the apartments are to be sold privately. This is nothing more than a trick to allow the demolition of the towers and private sales of apartments to proceed while the government can claim no public land has been sold.

For decades, the CFMEU, along with all the other building industry unions, has functioned as an integral component of successive Labor governments as they have run down and slashed public housing stock as part of their broader pro-business agenda.

The CFMEU's tepid criticisms of the destruction of public housing are nothing more than empty bluster, aimed at bolstering its bogus reputation as a "left-wing" and "militant" union and covering over its real role—maintaining industrial peace for property developers

and the Labor government and providing the workforce to carry out Labor's profit-driven redevelopment plan.

The wrecking operation could be brought to an immediate halt through a sector wide ban on demolition-related work at the towers, backed up by further strikes and industrial action targeting those companies involved in the destructive operation. But the CFMEU leadership has not, and will not, call any such action.

The reality is that the CFMEU and other building unions will oversee the demolition, just as they have overseen attacks on real wages, conditions, safety and job security in the construction industry for decades. This is because they are intimately tied not just to the Labor government, but to the big developers and their financiers, including through their joint control of the superannuation funds—the largest financial institutions in the country and major investors in the property sector.

This means that, to stop the destruction of public housing, construction workers will have to take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees must be built on building sites across Melbourne and more broadly, to link up with committees of public housing residents, supporters and other workers, in a united counteroffensive against the demolition of the 44 towers and the broader assault on public housing.

The Socialist Equality Party is holding a public meeting, in Melbourne and online, to discuss how to take forward the struggle against the Victorian Labor government's plan to demolish 44 public housing towers. It is titled: "Ban Labor's demolition of Melbourne's public housing towers! Fight for a socialist housing program!"

Register today to attend!

WHEN: 3:00 p.m., Sunday 27 July

WHERE: Supper Room, Kensington Town Hall, 30-34 Bellair Street, Kensington VIC 3031

Or join online on Zoom.



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