

SEP (Australia) opposes demolition of Melbourne public housing towers

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) held a public meeting on Sunday titled “Ban Labor’s demolition of Melbourne’s public housing towers! Fight for a socialist housing program!” The meeting outlined a perspective of how to take forward the struggle to stop the demolition.

The Victorian Labor government is planning to tear down 44 public housing towers across Melbourne. The proposed demolitions, which will be the largest destruction of public housing in Australian history, are forcing around 10,000 people from their homes. Many of these residents are migrant families, elderly or disabled, and are among the most vulnerable layers of the working class.

The meeting was held in the inner-city suburb of Kensington, near several of the housing estates slated for demolition. Around 100 people attended in person and online, including housing residents from around Melbourne, workers and youth across Australia, as well as international attendees from New Zealand, Germany and Norway. Comments from several workers and residents who attended are published here.

Chairing the meeting was Sue Phillips, a member of the SEP’s National Committee. In her opening remarks, Phillips laid out the context in which the demolition was taking place: a sharp shift to the right by governments, adopting increasingly authoritarian and anti-working-class policies. “Across the globe, the conditions of workers, immigrants, and the oppressed are under sustained and systematic assault,” she said.

Phillips explained that public housing in Australia was built in the 1960s, during the post-World War II boom, and would provide homes for many waves of refugees, among other workers. But in the 1980s, Phillips said, “the post-war commitment that every working-class person deserved secure, affordable housing gave way to profit imperatives and a market-driven agenda.”

She stressed that this was part of a global process, in which governments are dismantling public housing and shifting the burden of housing from the state to private markets. The assault on public housing, she said, was an attack on the social rights of the entire working class.

Phillips noted that the formation in March of the Neighbourhood Action Committee (NAC), a rank-and-file committee of residents and workers independent of the unions

and parliamentary parties, was a significant step forward that had to be developed.

“What is urgently required is the development of a political movement rooted in the working class—residents, workers, students—fighting for the total ban of the demolition plan, fighting against capitalism for a socialist program and for a massive expansion of high-quality, publicly owned and publicly managed housing,” she said.

The first speaker on the panel was Peter Byrne, an architect and longstanding SEP member, as well as a leading member of the NAC.

Byrne presented a detailed report refuting the campaign of lies and disinformation used by the Labor government and its body, Homes Victoria, to justify the demolition and pressure residents to accept relocations. This includes false claims that the towers are unsafe and therefore must be pulled down, and that displaced residents could return to their original location after the demolition.

Independent engineers have shown that simple and minimal structural additions could bring the towers up to current earthquake codes, Byrne stated. Moreover, an architects’ report has proved that refurbishing the towers would cost substantially less than Labor’s demolition plan.

Byrne bluntly stated the real reason behind Labor’s profit-driven agenda, “to reduce the state government debt, predicted to be over \$190 billion in the next few years, by selling off or leasing public land to developers.” He added: “Driving working class residents out of these prime inner-city estates is the real agenda.”

He further explained that the towers will be largely replaced with private apartments, as well as a number of “social housing” units—that is, managed by private operators, where residents will have higher rents and reduced security of tenure.

Byrne denounced the Construction, Forestry, and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU) bureaucracy for failing to organise any actions by building workers to stop the demolition. This was because, he explained, “the CFMEU officials are connected by a thousand threads to the government, the councils, the property developers and companies whose interests lie in the suppression of the struggles of workers.”

He said the building of the NAC and other rank-and-file

committees among public housing residents was necessary to take forward the struggle. Such committees must call for the mobilisation of workers in construction and other industries to halt the government's pro-corporate demolition. Only an independent movement of the working class could defend the towers and the right to public housing.

Next on the speaker's list was Steve James, a member of the SEP (UK) in Glasgow, whose report was presented via video. James previously lived in one of Glasgow's high-rise public housing blocks that were recently destroyed.

James' contribution underlined the international character of the assault on public housing. He related the experience of the Glasgow towers, destroyed on utterly false pretexts in order to make way for private apartments, strikingly similar to Labor's plan for the Melbourne towers.

He said: "Like their peers worldwide, the UK financial oligarchy have long resented social concessions like subsidised quality housing, the National Health Service, social care, free education and such like. They view all of this as an intolerable incursion on their profits."

James also indicted the Labour Party and trade unions in Britain for their role in destroying housing to meet the interests of the capitalist ruling class. He underlined the necessity for a struggle by workers against all the mainstream parties, who are engaged in assaulting the social needs of ordinary people.

The final speaker was Oscar Grenfell, a member of the SEP National Committee and a leading writer for the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Grenfell placed the demolition within the context of a historic breakdown of world capitalism. While the towers were constructed during the postwar boom, an era of relative capitalist stability, the world situation today is one of instability and crisis, with governments worldwide carrying out a social counter-revolution. "The crucial political point is that reform is no longer on the agenda," he said.

Led by the fascistic Trump administration in the US, imperialist powers are engaged in war and militarism abroad, funded by massive increases in military spending. The working class is being made to pay for this war spending through heightened austerity, Grenfell said, with the question of public housing "a central target battleground of the class war that is underway globally."

The Anthony Albanese Labor government is a sharp expression of this process. It has taken annual military spending to above \$50 billion, and plans to acquire nuclear-powered submarines under the AUKUS pact at a cost of \$368 billion. Albanese's main policy to purportedly address the housing crisis by contrast is costed at just \$10 billion over 5 years, and is aimed at constructing a paltry 30,000 "affordable" dwellings. "To call this a drop in the bucket would be an exaggeration," Grenfell stated.

The defence of public housing therefore requires a political struggle against the Labor government and the dominance of

society by corporate interests—that is, a struggle against capitalism.

Grenfell highlighted that this essential fact is being covered up by a host of fake left-wing groups, who claim to oppose the Melbourne demolition plan. All of these organisations, from the capitalist Greens and pseudo-left Victorian Socialists to the Renters and Housing Union of Australia, are united by a perspective to pressure the very Labor government that is gutting the towers.

Grenfell said "they are tied to the corporatised union leaderships, Labor and the existing political system. They don't represent the working class, but a privileged layer of the middle class that seeks to improve its own position within capitalism."

Instead, the SEP insists that public housing can be saved, not through polite requests but through a real struggle. That fight must be based on a socialist program to mobilise the entire working class and reorganise society to meet social need, not private profit.

A discussion followed these reports, involving questions and contributions from attendees. These included questions on the specific property developers involved in Labor's pro-corporate demolition, as well as the Victorian Socialists and their promotion of Labor as a "lesser evil."

One online audience member, an architect, made comments on the parliamentary inquiry into the housing demolition plan, which she described as "a subterfuge, a performative mechanism masking pre-determined outcomes", and that private developers will be given "virtual free rein" over the estate sites.

After the meeting, SEP members spoke with residents and workers about joining the Neighbourhood Action Committee and how they can become involved in its campaign to mobilise the working class to defend public housing.



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