

Melbourne public housing residents and workers speak out against Labor government's demolition plan

Our reporters
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Residents of the 44 public housing towers in Melbourne, which are being demolished by the state Labor government as part of a pro-business plan, attended the Socialist Equality Party's (SEP) meeting on Sunday and spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters afterwards.

At the meeting, members of the SEP outlined a perspective for fighting the demolition through the formation of neighbourhood rank-and-file committees. An appeal had to be made, the SEP stressed, to broader sections of the working class, including in construction, to take industrial and political action to halt the destruction. A full report of the meeting, including video, is published here.

Kate, a grandmother from Somalia and resident of the Flemington towers for 25 years, said: "The public meeting was great. It's good to see people trying to help us to stop the demolition, and to understand why it's happening and make that clear to people, especially the workers. The building workers are doing the job, but they don't understand what's going on."

"It was an international meeting and there were good speakers, including the one from Britain. Oscar's was good because he covered everything, all the politics behind this."

She is waiting to be relocated from her tower. "[Homes Victoria] want me to accept a private home," she said, "but I don't want it. My husband, who has heart issues, and I are waiting, so we don't know where they will put us. I want somewhere close by, but it might not be."

Kate spoke on the profit-driven nature of the demolition agenda. "Labor is doing all of this for money. It's all for the rich people, who the government

always supports. They don't care at all about the working class, or even middle-class people. The land has been rented for 40 years. It's going to be a big profit for them, it's a business.

"Whether it's Labor or Liberal or Greens, whatever the government is, it's all the same shit for us and for workers. There's no difference. When they want to be elected, they talk sweet things, but afterwards they don't want to know you. I don't vote for any of them."

Kate is a member of the Neighbourhood Action Committee (NAC), a rank-and-file committee formed in March to organise residents independently of the parliamentary parties and fight to stop the demolition.

She said: "We have to inform the workers and get them to support us. Some of the construction workers say things like 'I have a family, I need money, I feel conflicted.' We understand this. We don't blame them. But we need to work together. Because if they are treating people in public housing like this today, they will do it to other workers tomorrow. It won't matter who you are or where you come from."

Tony, a cleaner who has lived in the Flemington towers for over a decade, said: "This demolition plan is devastating. It's splitting up the community and they're wanting people who live in these communities to live in the outer suburbs, which is going to be difficult to start from scratch."

Tony's family is not yet facing eviction. "The uncertainty of not knowing where we are going to be in five years or even a year from today, it just gives us anxiety. All the other residents here have that anxiety. They don't know what they're going to do with their kids, which school they're going to go to, etc. Some of us work here in inner Melbourne. There's going to be

different transport and different [travel] times once we're further out."

Tony understood that the government was using lies to justify the demolition. "They say they are knocking the towers down because they are old and need too much [work], but I don't think that at all. And besides, the governments have done nothing to maintain these towers over the years, it all seems to be done deliberately. As a cleaner myself, I see a lot of new apartments and they are horrible compared to ours. Ours are big and luxurious by comparison. They want to get rid of them and make profit from smaller homes."

He spoke on the fact that Labor was carrying out the demolition. "The state and federal governments are struggling financially, and they just don't want to deal with public housing anymore. It's all about making money for the state and for their own pockets, and the impact on us doesn't matter to them.

"The government's military spending is a horrible waste of taxpayers' money. They've even cut back on the NDIS [the disability service] as well. All of these social services are being cut for war. It seems like with all this defence spending that they're preparing for World War III. As I said, for the governments, it's like the working class doesn't exist anymore, they don't really care.

"Labor is looking after their mates in the union officials, especially the CFMEU [Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union]. Everyone here knows it's Labor and the unions working together to destroy these towers. There's a clear connection between them in this operation, and they don't care about the people who live here."

Tony agreed with the perspective of the NAC to mobilise workers in construction and other industries. "This is good. I hope construction workers could stop what they are doing and drop their tools. They all need to work as well, I'm sure they've got rent and mortgages themselves and the cost of living is difficult for everyone. But we have to try and win them over."

Hanan, a hotel cleaner who lives in the North Melbourne flats, attended the SEP meeting. She came to Australia as a refugee from Sudan and has lived in public housing for seven years.

She said: "A lot of the people affected by this are migrants, refugees, unemployed, single mums. This

meeting gave us all a voice. It was good to see in the public meeting that people outside of the towers want to stop the demolition too, that they want to fight for this."

The demolition will disrupt her family's life: "Here I have a community and friends, people who can look after my three kids when I'm not home or drop them off at school. Just imagine if I have to move from here, that all disappears. Everything will be much harder for me and for others.

"I was looking at the prices for new apartments being built where the public housing is now, the deposit is \$100,000. But that's far too expensive for me, and that's one of the cheaper ones with one bedroom."

She said: "I know people who need public housing. A fellow house cleaner who makes \$250 a week is living in a hotel in the city, her son has to go to school in North Melbourne from the city, she and her son want to move into public housing. There should be more."

Gary, a retired urban planner who lives in North Melbourne near one of the housing estates, said: "Some of my family have lived in flats and it's all going to be ripped apart. The towers need renovation rather than ripping it all down. I've been inside it many times and I've read architects' reports, and they all say the same things, that they don't need ripping down. These architects are people in the know but the government won't listen.

"It's all happening to get more money out of this real estate. Labor has gone very far to the right, so I'm not surprised. They are a different party from when I was young. Labor is now a sort of 'Liberal light.'

"A movement of workers is badly needed, certainly. The working class is being pummelled at the moment and so it needs a strong opposition to what the government is doing. The idea of a struggle against Labor is so valid at the moment."



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