

Australia: Hundreds protest Labor government plans to demolish Melbourne public housing towers

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More than 500 people took part in a demonstration in Melbourne on Saturday to oppose the Victorian state Labor government's plans to demolish 44 public housing towers in the city. The protest included a march to the headquarters of Homes Victoria—the government agency responsible for housing—and a march to the state parliament.

At least 10,000 residents will be displaced by the demolitions, which are part of an attack on public housing around Australia and internationally in the interests of boosting corporate profits and slashing government expenditure in vital social services to stack ballooning military budgets.

Many workers and youth attended Saturday's rally, highlighting broad and growing opposition to Labor's plan, and a willingness to fight back against the degradation of workers' social and living conditions. However, the carefully stage-managed event's political leadership—above all the Greens, unions and psuedo-left organisations Socialist Alliance and Victorian Socialists—ensured that the event would provide no way forward for the residents of the towers and the broader working class.

Several residents and other workers and youth who have been affected by the housing crisis spoke at the demonstration.

They gave moving and often harrowing testimony on the campaign of lies and misinformation presented by the Labor government and Homes Victoria, used to try and force residents out of the public housing towers.

Residents condemned the government's demolition for breaking up communities of vulnerable people, including refugees, impoverished working-class families and people living with disabilities. They highlighted that the government's plan will replace publicly funded housing with so-called "social housing" and private accommodations, which will price out poorer sections of the population and make profits for the real estate and construction corporations.

The defiance of the residents in the face of Labor's plans won a warm response from the workers and youth present.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members interviewed several attendees at the rally. You can read the interviews here. The SEP explained that to halt the demolitions and defend public housing more broadly requires an independent movement of residents linking up with workers, particularly building workers, in opposition to the Labor government's plan.

Such a perspective, based on the power of the working class, is diametrically opposed to that which was presented by the main speakers at Saturday's rally. They promoted the illusion that the Labor government could be pressured to back down from its plans to demolish the towers.

In fact, halting the demolition went virtually unmentioned by speakers who weren't residents.

Representatives from the Renters and Housing Union (RAHU), an organisation dominated by the pseudo-left, handed out flyers in which no demand was made to stop the demolitions.

Instead, RAHU's main demand states: "If and when a strong case is made for demolition, build replacement public housing nearby or elsewhere on the estate first, and relocate the tenants when complete."

The bankruptcy of the protest leaders was most sharply expressed by Greens member of state parliament Gabrielle de Vietri, who has postured as an opponent of Labor's demolition project.

The Greens' milquetoast criticisms of the demolitions have been accompanied by a campaign of funnelling opposition into court cases and parliamentary enquiries. Such measures alone will be used to stifle residents' anger, prevent independent action and, particularly in the case of the dismissed court case, provide the government with legal impunity as it carries out its attack on the social rights of the working class.

De Vietri made the unsubstantiated claim that such methods have led to previous victories against privatisation and the demolition of public housing.

"Every day that we resist their plans ... eventually we will force Labor to decide whether they want to stand by their privatisation plan and hand over this public land to private developers, or whether they will listen to the community, abandon their plan and stop this disastrous project," she said.

Taking this appeal to Labor a step further, de Vietri openly called for the diversion of the opposition to the demolition into a de facto promotion of Labor in the Victorian state election, which is due to be held in 2026.

"Ultimately, what it comes down to is whether they are going to listen to their donors or whether they are going to listen to their voters," she said. "And I'm not saying that because I'm sceptical or because we stand to benefit from that plan of pushing it so that

it becomes an election issue. I'm saying that because that is the only language they speak. If we can push this disastrous plan to the point where they are forced to choose between their voters and donors next year, as an election looms, that is when we will force them to abandon it."

The experience of this May's federal election revealed more clearly than ever before the role of the Greens in propping up the Labor Party.

No sooner had the official election campaign begun than did the Greens drop all pretence of opposition to the Labor's attacks on the living conditions of the working class or support for Israel's genocide in Gaza, so anxious were the Greens to have a power-sharing arrangement with Labor in the event of a hung parliament.

In the lead up to the election, the Greens shelved their opposition to Labor's housing legislation, helping to pass the measures which were a handout to the property developers and did nothing to address the massive affordability crisis.

The Greens' hope for a coalition with Labor at the federal level did not pan out, so the attention has now shifted to the state elections.

De Vietri admitted that the Greens' perspective is not even to prevent the demolitions, but to delay them so that residents can be moved out of the towers first, saying: "We've joined the residents to demand no more pre-demolition works while this land is still inhabited, no one forced from their homes under threat."

In a rambling speech, the pseudo-left Socialist Alliance's Sue Bolton—a councillor in the inner-north council of Merri-Bek since 2012—echoed de Vietri's promotion of appeals to Labor.

"We obviously want to put pressure on the politicians, but the politicians won't really experience that pressure that will force them to stop in their tracks until we build a very strong movement," she said. "So that means we need to do everything possible to build the power of the people. It means protests like this."

The idea that the primary issue is of how loudly one can shout down the halls of parliament has been shown to be an utter fraud time and again. This line presents the demolition of the towers as a single issue, unrelated to Labor's broader program and class character as a ruthless instrument of finance capital.

In reality, the assault on public housing is one expression of an austerity agenda across the board. At the federal level, Labor has inflicted the massive cost-of-living crisis on the working class. In Victoria, it is carrying out an offensive against public spending including the sacking of thousands of public sector workers and a reduction in the budget for chronically underfunded schools.

For the past four decades, Labor has spearheaded a pro-business offensive against jobs, wages and working conditions, as well as the privatisation or corporatisation of many social services.

The bankruptcy of protest politics has been graphically revealed over the past two years.

The Greens, Socialist Alliance and other fake left tendencies have promoted this bankrupt perspective in relation to the Gaza genocide, claiming that Labor can be pressured to end its support for the war crimes. Hundreds of thousands of people around Australia have joined millions worldwide in protesting against the US and Israel's ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people.

The fact that the Labor federal government of Anthony Albanese in Australia, like its counterparts in the imperialist centres around the world, has continued to support the Israeli state as it carries out the mass slaughter is the clearest exposure of the protest politics promoted by these groups.

Their promotion of appeals to Labor and the capitalist state is a result of the fact that these tendencies are pro-war, pro-capitalist organisations. Both the Greens and Socialist Alliance presented costed military policies during the May federal election campaign.

In propping up Labor, these tendencies are joined by the unions.

The great unmentionable during Saturday's rally was the role of the trade unions, above all the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU), which are tied by a thousand strings to the Labor Party. The CFMEU has presented phoney opposition to the demolition of the public housing towers, while doing everything it can to prevent a fight by workers—above all, its own members who are involved in the demolition works—against the demolition.

Speakers like de Vietri, Bolton, RAHU representatives and Steph Price from the pseudo-left Victorian Socialists avoided the question of the unions like the plague, because it would expose their own role in propping up Labor and the unions while preventing an independent movement of residents and workers to stop the demolition.

In contrast, the SEP members at the rally spoke with residents, workers, youth and supporters of public housing about the urgent need to organise independently of all these organisations. SEP campaigners warned that the demolition would proceed if opposition remains confined to appeals to Labor through protest, courts and inquiries.

The SEP called on those in attendance to join the struggle to mobilise building workers and other sections of the working class to halt the demolition, defend public housing and fight for the social rights of the working class like housing, education, healthcare and welfare which are being decimated under the capitalist system.

To join the fight against the demolition of the Melbourne towers and for the defence of public housing more broadly, sign up as a member of the Neighbourhood Action Committee established by the SEP.



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