Australia: Inquiry continues whitewash of Melbourne public housing demolition

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Last month, the Legal and Social Issues Committee of the Victorian Legislative Council held the final hearings in its inquiry into the state Labor government's plan to demolish 44 public housing towers in inner Melbourne.

The existing towers house 10,000 working class residents, who will be turfed out of their homes and relocated, in many cases to the outer suburbs, far from their jobs, schools and communities. Once completed, the new builds will accommodate 19,000 residents in private apartments, with just 11,000 places for social housing tenants.

These privately owned and operated "community housing" units will be more costly and provide less security of tenure than the public housing they replace. Residents were previously given verbal assurances that they will have a "right to return" after the rebuild, but written references to this indicate that it will be subject to "the suitability of new homes"—over which residents have no control or input.

Moreover, the Labor government is undertaking the destruction of vast swathes of public housing amid a deepening housing crisis. The national shortage of affordable housing is estimated at more than 600,000, while in Victoria alone, some 60,000 people are on the waiting list for public housing.

The inquiry is a thinly disguised exercise in covering over the profit motive behind the wrecking operation and promoting illusions that the Labor government can be persuaded to change its plans through polite appeals and parliamentary machinations. The Greens, who called for the inquiry, are leading the effort to divert mounting opposition to the demolition among residents and the broader working class into safe channels.

Underscoring its futility, the committee will not issue its report until December, while the Labor government plans to fully vacate all five Tranche 1 towers by the end of September in order to proceed with their destruction. Two buildings have already been emptied, more than 70 percent of residents have been removed from the other three and preparatory demolition work has already begun.

The five public hearings culminated on August 6, with the appearance of Victorian Housing Minister Harriet Shing, who incessantly repeated the government's pretext for the demolition: "the 44 towers have exceeded their operational life" and are no longer "fit for purpose."

Shing did not acknowledge evidence presented in earlier hearings by structural engineers, who defended the integrity of the towers. Instead, she insisted they showed "a cataclysmically terrible failure of precast concrete slab construction" and that "the facts of their decline are clear."

Shing repeatedly refused to back her assertions about the buildings' supposed deterioration by providing the technical report on which she based such claims. Asked to produce such a report, Shing tried to divert from the question, saying "Have you held the concrete in your hands that crumbled?"

In fact, of 158 documents supposedly establishing the necessity of the demolition plan, the Labor government has released just 12, invoking "executive privilege"—that is, that revealing the documents is not in the "public interest" because it would reveal the "deliberative processes" of Cabinet or the Executive Government.

Shing and the rest of Jacinta Allan's Labor government are not just concerned that producing these documents would cast doubt over the need to raze the towers, but that they would reveal the true motivation behind the demolition plan: to drive workers and the

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poor out of the inner city and free up valuable real estate to create new profit opportunities for property developers and finance capital.

In a further effort to divert attention from the secret documents, Shing reiterated a claim made by Labor in previous hearings, that disinformation has been spread at the towers by "certain actors to commodify and to weaponise and to politicise uncertainty… an absolute disgrace." Greens MP and inquiry panellist Anasina Gray-Barberio interjected: "Are you looking straight at me as you are saying that, Minister?"

This scuffle was merely a sideshow to distract from the genuine opposition to the housing demolition emerging among residents and broader layers of the working class. What both Labor and the Greens are really worried about is not "disinformation," but exposure of the real motives behind the demolition.

Their biggest concern is what the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) alone is raising—the need for a united counteroffensive of rank-and-file workers and residents to halt the demolition of the 44 towers and the broader assault on public housing.

The SEP's perspective is in stark contrast to that put forward by various housing activist groups involved in the tower dispute, who present the demolition plan as a single issue, connected to nothing broader than the overall crisis of housing affordability. Their friendly participation in the inquiry underscores that they are seeking to promote illusions that the Labor government can be persuaded to change course.

Among these groups is the Renters and Housing Union (RAHU), which was represented at the inquiry by Secretary Harry Millward and member Jordan van den Lamb, known on social media as "purplepingers," who was the lead Senate candidate for the pseudo-left Victorian Socialists in the May federal election.

Van den Lamb took the promotion of illusions in capitalist political parties to an extraordinary level, stating that "if state governments could do it [build the towers] under [Liberal Prime Minister from 1949–1966] Robert Menzies, then we could do it again."

This statement is totally ahistorical, ignoring the broader context surrounding the housebuilding boom, including the construction of many of the Melbourne towers, while the arch-conservative Menzies was in office. Under conditions of relative prosperity in the post-war period, capitalist governments in Australia, as elsewhere, undertook mass public housing projects to provide homes for workers to supply the vast scaling up of industry and profits.

The political and economic situation today is completely and irreversibly transformed. Public housing is being eviscerated around the world as part of a broader assault on the living and working conditions of the working class, amid a deepening capitalist crisis.

Van den Lamb's comments, like the inquiry as a whole, are aimed at confusing and disarming residents and the broader working class by covering for the Labor government and capitalism itself, under which all human needs, including the basic right to a place to live, are subordinated to profit demands.

To defeat the destruction of the 44 towers and other attacks on public housing, will require a political struggle, uniting residents and workers. In the first instance, residents should make a powerful appeal to rank-and-file building workers, without whose labour the demolition plans cannot proceed, as well as to broader layers of the working class, who all face attacks on their living and working conditions.

This will require the building of new organisations of struggle, neighbourhood and workplace rank-and-file committees, independent of Labor, the unions, the Greens and all other groups that seek to divert the class struggle behind appeals to capitalist governments.

Above all, what is needed is a fight for workers to take political power and reorganise society on the basis of socialist policies. This includes placing the banks, superannuation funds and corporations under public ownership and democratic workers' control and ensuring the social right of all to decent, secure housing.

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