

Australia: Meeting on demolition of Melbourne public housing towers blocks SEP speaker

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About 300 people attended a public meeting in Melbourne on Thursday. The meeting, titled “Standing together for Victoria’s public housing,” was ostensibly held to oppose the state Labor government’s plans to demolish 44 public housing towers in Melbourne’s inner suburbs, displacing at least 10,000 people from their homes. This is the greatest assault on public housing in Australia’s history.

Yet among the 16 speakers at Thursday’s event, the Labor government went virtually unmentioned. This is because the organisers—above all the Greens, pseudo-left organisations, such as Socialist Alliance and Victorian Socialists, and trade unions—are deliberately attempting to obscure the role of Labor and the profit interests it represents.

These groupings have promoted the illusion that the decision to tear down the public housing towers is nothing more than a bad policy mistake that can be rectified through applying sufficient pressure—through parliamentary inquiries, repeated court cases and protests.

In fact, the towers’ destruction was presented as a regrettable but unavoidable fact. Not one speaker called for an immediate halt to the demolition.

Among the speakers were residents who gave shocking testimony of lies, misinformation and intimidation used by government body Homes Victoria to try and evict public housing tenants.

More than half of the speeches were delivered by researchers and experts in law, architecture, engineering and urban planning. These academics reiterated previous research which refuted Labor’s claim that the towers must be knocked down because they do not meet modern building standards and are beyond repair.

One speaker, Richard Cameron, is a retired architect who was a designer of the original towers. Cameron said independent estimates showed that refurbishment of the towers to modern standards would cost roughly \$25 million per tower compared to \$120 million per tower to demolish them—a process that would also produce a huge amount of waste.

Some experts contrasted Labor’s gutting of public infrastructure with the government’s willingness to spend

billions of dollars on the military, including the \$368 billion anti-China AUKUS pact with the US and UK. This point evoked support from the audience.

Yet none of the speakers explained why the government is proceeding with the demolition or referred to the profit interests it served. The absence of any exposure of Labor’s role lent itself to yet more dead-end appeals to the government.

Louisa Bassini, a lawyer and member of the pseudo-left Victorian Socialists promoted a court case starting October 27 which is an appeal of the Supreme Court’s April decision in favour of the government’s privatisation plans against a class action by nearly 500 residents. But as the April ruling has already made clear, legal action by itself, in the absence of a broad-based movement of the working class, is a dead-end.

Only the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and Neighbourhood Action Committee (NAC) of residents and supporters called for an immediate halt to the destruction of the towers and outlined a political strategy to fight the Labor government’s far-advanced plans. SEP and NAC members handed out 200 copies of the SEP statement, “Halt the demolition of Melbourne’s 44 public housing towers!”

Before the event, SEP members were accosted by organisers, who attempted to prevent attendees from reading the statement. One organiser, Kate Shaw—a research fellow in urban planning at the University of Melbourne—called SEP and NAC members “arseholes” who “slag us off online.”

Shaw’s own political perspective was revealed during the meeting. As the final speaker on the panel, Shaw bemoaned the fact that the government had “refused to listen for too long.” She absurdly claimed that the Victorian state government was unique in its privatisation schemes, saying that “governments around the world” are reversing privatisation, when it is all too evident that the opposite has been taking place.

Following Shaw, the meeting was opened to questions and contributions from the floor.

SEP and NAC member Peter Byrne, an architect, immediately raised his hand to speak. Initially, Shaw, who was mediating the Q&A, mistook Byrne for Richard Riordan—shadow minister for planning and housing from the

right-wing Liberal Party—and was about to call on him to speak.

Upon realising the speaker was a member of the SEP, she said: “Are you a Socialist Equity [sic] person?” and refused to allow Byrne to speak. Byrne protested this attempt to suppress free discussion in the meeting, making the obvious point that Shaw was prepared to let a Liberal shadow minister speak, but not a socialist.

Having blocked Byrne, Shaw quickly handed over to Sue Bolton from the pseudo-left Socialist Alliance, who called for “building a coalition of action” involving the unions. She emphasised the need “to work out how to maintain that big alliance,” clearly responding to the SEP’s stinging criticisms of the role of the pseudo-left and Greens.

The only “action” that this “big alliance” has taken, however, has been to pressure and appeal to the Labor government to modify its plans, even as preparation for the demolition of the first five towers proceeds apace. Bolton’s call for the involvement of the trade unions, which are intimately tied to the Labor Party, is a fraud. The only industrial union to endorse the meeting, the Maritime Union of Australia, did not even bother to attend.

Bolton was forced to address the obvious fact that the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU) had taken no action to black-ban work on the demolition of the towers. She simply said they were having the “wool pulled over their eyes” and the task was to “educate” the unions.

No amount of “education” is going to convince the CFMEU bureaucrats to make meaningful action to stop Labor’s plans. The only “action” taken so far by the CFMEU has been to make a submission in February to a parliamentary inquiry, calling for greater “community consultation” and raising the business potential of environmentally retrofitting the towers—proposals ignored by the government.

The hostility at the meeting towards the SEP is precisely because it calling for residents and workers to organise independently of Labor, the unions, the Greens and all their pseudo-left apologists and is politically assisting the Neighbourhood Action Committee to do so.

The bankrupt political perspective of the Greens and pseudo-left was bluntly spelled out by Greens state MP Gabrielle de Vietri who declared public housing had to be made an “unavoidable election issue” ahead of the 2026 state elections.

“What is the next step?” de Vietri stated. “I think that we have a unique target and a unique opportunity and the window for activation is very specific. And that is the next 12 months, because the Victorian Labor government is going to be very sensitive in an election year to public sentiment.”

All of this is to divert, stifle and suffocate the anger and opposition of residents of the housing towers and broader concerns in the working class about the crisis of housing. Five towers are slated for demolition by the end of the year.

Anger boiled over at the meeting when an elderly homeless

woman who was evicted from public housing interrupted de Vietri. Expressing the frustration of the few residents and workers at the meeting, she declared that all the speakers were talking at an “academic level.” Highlighting the brutal reality facing many evicted residents, she simply said: “I won’t survive.”

She called on the speakers to “name names” and to “name the culprits,” pointing to the obvious fact that no one in the meeting had indicted Labor and the business interests with which it is colluding.

Shaw proceeded to speak over the woman and ignored what she had said.

SEP members campaigned after the event and spoke to attendees who were appalled by the decision to block Byrne from speaking in the meeting. As campaigners explained, what Shaw and other speakers were hostile to was the SEP’s political perspective—that the residents and working class had to take matters into their own hands through the formation of rank-and-file committees like the NAC to wage a fight against the demolition and the Labor government itself.

Labor’s plan to bulldoze and privatise public housing is not a matter of mistaken decisions, as the Greens and pseudo-left claim. It is an expression of the assault on the entire working class amid a deepening global crisis of the capitalist profit system.

The transparent aim of Labor’s scheme is to rid prime inner-city real estate of the poor and working-class families and sell it off to property developers and financiers who are making huge profits amid a profound housing crisis that has forced workers into unaffordable rentals and massive debt.

The defence of public housing requires a political struggle by the working class against the Labor government and the capitalist system it defends. This means a fight for a socialist program based on the pressing social needs of ordinary working people, not the profits of a tiny, wealthy minority.

We urge all public housing residents throughout Australia, and supporters of public housing throughout the working class, to contact us today to discuss this perspective and how you can build a rank-and-file committee in your workplace or neighbourhood.



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