

Australian public tower residents further victimised by Homes Victoria

Margaret Rees
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Following the decision by the Labor state government in Victoria to demolish 44 public housing towers in inner Melbourne, the residents remaining in the targeted flats are being subjected to a war of nerves by the government agency Homes Victoria.

Premier Jacinta Allan's government wants to demolish the public housing in the state capital, starting with the towers in Flemington and North Melbourne, in order to cede the valuable land to property developers for 40 years. The developers intend to build their own high rises to reap a handsome profit.

There are about 10,000 residents in the public towers. Under Labor's plan, the developers will construct 30,000 units but only 11,000—about one-third—are earmarked for so-called social housing, which is far inferior to the existing public housing in security of tenure. Public housing has permanent tenure so many residents have been able to live in the towers for decades, but tenure in social housing can be as short as two years.

Residents remaining in the towers are living in limbo while they wait for Homes Victoria relocation officers to organise possible transfers for them to supposedly suitable housing. The balance of power is weighted against them in their dealings with the officers.

Many of the residents come from refugee backgrounds, with their lives upturned by war and dislocation, and English is not their first language. In particular, documents in official English can create enormous stress.

Negotiations between the relocation officers and the residents have consisted of to-ing and fro-ing about possible relocations, where at any point the officers can send a resident an official letter to speed up the process.

These letters are couched in terms that the residents

cannot easily understand, conveying threats that if they do not quickly accept an "offer" they will have their priority removed. That would leave them vulnerable to homelessness while languishing on the Victorian Housing Register, which has 60,000 applicants for public or social housing, few of whom receive homes.

One resident who received a "generic refused offer letter" was informed that they had one more priority offer only and would suffer removal from priority if they refused it.

The letter was written in incomprehensible terms. It suggested they could appeal such a decision by obtaining evidence from their doctor to be provided on a specific form. Then further ambiguous information was provided about the suitability of areas for relocation.

This opaque official communication caused distress to the resident, who told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "They said that if I don't take the second place they offer, then they can take me off the list. I know this area [the existing towers] very well. I have lived here pretty much my whole life. It's terrible, it's terrible."

The resident suffers from serious ill health and is waiting for blood pressure and other medical test results, but Homes Victoria has not taken this into consideration.

The adverse health situation is so serious it made the resident unable to work, but because a specific medical form had yet to be filled in, the resident was being treated as not requiring special consideration.

The accommodation that Homes Victoria offered was so unsuitable that the resident immediately refused it, but this refusal generated the generic letter from Homes Victoria. This sort of communication serves to depersonalise the recipients and adds to the stress they are already feeling about being uprooted from their

homes of many years.

Another resident had received a similar official communication after their relocation negotiations broke down. They had already filled in the form to apply for special consideration and were being unfairly ordered to do it again. This appeared to be a punitive requirement in response to having refused an offer.

The resident explained the pressure applied by a relocation officer to accept an offer. “After I refused this house, she called me next day and said, ‘Do you make a decision?’ I said I refused. Then they said: ‘We need you to take this house. You need to choose.’

“I said, ‘Let me think about it, give me time.’ She said, ‘Today is Friday. You have to make a decision over the weekend. You have to give us your answer on Monday.’

“How can you make a decision like that in two days? They are doing this to us, pushing us. This is the way they are treating us. How come I have to make a decision in two days when this is where I am going to live my whole life?”

The result was intensified stress. “Yes, I have a lot of stress. I don’t go to my work. I was supposed to work today, I would have made good money, but the reason I didn’t go is this stress I am under. When I received this letter, I was so shocked.

“And my children are stressed too! They say, ‘We don’t want to go far. We don’t want to do this.’

“The government don’t listen and they don’t care. The people in government just want to fill their pockets.

“They need to treat the residents, who have been living here a long time, like human beings. The [relocation officers], they’re not human. They are lying. They just want to make the government happy. All they want to do is make sure they shift you out.

“This constant pressure on me is having a terrible effect. For example, when I got this message saying that I had to appeal. I’ve had to see a doctor, I’m getting so stressed...

“I’m getting false things told to me. I feel like they just want me out. I’m so stressed I don’t sleep. Like how are you meant to make such a decision in two days? It is just pressurising us. Yeah, I’m getting punished.”

The fact that Homes Victoria is proceeding in this brutal manner demonstrates the Labor government’s

determination to impose this program. This underlines the political bankruptcy of the perspective of appealing to the Labor government to change course. Yet this is being advanced by the Greens, the pseudo-left groups such as Victorian Socialists and Socialist Alliance and a bevy of single-issue protest groups.

This perspective has been tried and failed in various forms, such as a parliamentary inquiry and a Supreme Court case. The Labor government remains adamant that the towers must come down because it is part of its cost-cutting program directed against the working class.

There needs to be an opposed perspective, based on a turn to the wider working class for support and the formation of rank-and-file committees to fight the capitalist program of austerity and war.

This requires a socialist perspective. The vast resources created by the working class must be used to meet the pressing social needs of the majority, including for decent affordable housing, not the profits of the wealthy few.

A Neighbourhood Action Committee has been formed to unite the residents in the towers and the broader working class to halt the demolition of the public housing towers. The committee’s next meeting will be held on Sunday, November 16 at 2.30 p.m. at the Kensington Neighbourhood House, 89 McCracken St Kensington, and there is an online Zoom option.

We urge all public housing residents throughout Australia, and supporters of public housing throughout the working class, to join and become active within our Neighbourhood Action Committee. Contact us today!

Contact the SEP:

Phone: (02) 8218 3222

Email: sep@sep.org.au

Facebook: [SocialistEqualityPartyAustralia](https://www.facebook.com/SocialistEqualityPartyAustralia)

Twitter: [@SEP_Australia](https://twitter.com/SEP_Australia)

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