

Australian architects and building professionals demand halt to demolition of public housing towers

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Nearly 700 built environment practitioners have signed an open letter demanding an immediate halt to the Victorian state Labor government's planned demolition of Melbourne's 44 public housing towers that will lead to the displacement of more than 10,000 working-class residents and the destruction of entire communities.

The open letter is a significant development in the broad and growing opposition to the biggest destruction of public housing in Australia's history.

The open letter, addressed to Victorian Labor government housing minister Harriet Shing, has been signed by a range of building industry practitioners including architects, interior designers, town planners, engineers, project managers, electricians, carpenters, academics, students and building contractors. It was authored by the Building Action Now (BAN) group headed by Melbourne-based architects Cat Macleod of Bellemo & Cat, Bonnie Gordon of Playstreet, Carey Landwehr of CLAD, Nina Tory-Henderson of NMBW, Steve Mintern and Simon Robinson of OFFICE.

Signatories of the open letter include architects from practices such as ARM, Snohetta, BVN, Neeson Murcutt Nielle, DCM, Spowers, NH, Law, CO.OP and CHC. These architects explain, "Built environment practitioners are bound by ethical codes requiring evidence-based and sustainable practice, we will not side-step our professional duty and cannot remain silent. These demolitions proceed without evidence of assessments, ignore \$1.5 billion of potential savings, violate legislated climate commitments, worsen acute housing and homelessness crises, and displace 10,000+ residents in breach of international obligations."

Two of the 44 towers in inner suburb Carlton have already been demolished following a fraudulent eviction pretext by the government agency, Homes Victoria, that faulty sewer stacks meant they were uninhabitable. The demolition of three towers has been temporarily delayed by a class action by residents. But Homes Victoria has opposed the court ordered injunction, claiming without evidence that delaying demolition would cost an estimated \$4.2 million per month.

In January, Homes Victoria listed the next seven towers

targeted for demolition. These towers specifically house elderly residents, many of whom are in their 80s and 90s and may not survive the forced evictions.

The Victorian Labor government is pressing ahead with demolishing Melbourne's 44 public housing towers amid an acute housing and cost-of-living crisis which is gripping ordinary workers and youth across Victoria and Australia more broadly.

In Victoria, conservative figures suggest more than 24,000 people are homeless. More than 65,000 households are on the social housing waiting list, with average waits blowing out from under three months in the late 1990s to almost two years today. Demolishing solid, well located public housing will uproot thousands of residents and further tighten supply, with little or nothing built on these sites for decades.

OFFICE have written extensive reports carefully evaluating demolition versus refurbishment of public housing estates at Melbourne's Ascot Vale, Barak Beacon and Flemington estates.

These reports prove conclusively that refurbishment of the existing towers and new infill housing would be far less expensive—an estimated \$1.5 billion less expensive than the full demolition and rebuild strategy of the government. The real reason for the government's seemingly illogical strategy is to privatise the estates.

Labor's scheme will replace thousands of existing public housing units—owned and directly managed by the state—with a mix of private apartments and "social housing," run by nongovernment providers on a corporate, cost recovery basis. This shift means a permanent reduction in genuinely public, income based housing and an expansion of stock that can attract higher rents, government subsidies and future capital gains.

The aim is to open up prime inner city sites to large private developments, guaranteeing lucrative contracts, management fees and windfall profits for property developers, construction firms and real estate investment interests.

In the section headed "managed decline" the open letter states: "Government deliberately let buildings deteriorate, then

used that deterioration to justify demolition. This is not evidence-based renewal, it is manufactured obsolescence.”

Answering the oft repeated propaganda by Victoria’s Labor premier Jacinta Allan and Harriet Shing that the towers are “unfit for habitation, ”and Homes Victoria CEO Simon Newport’s claim that any attempt to refurbish the towers would be like “putting lipstick on a pig” the open letter explains: “While the towers do not meet contemporary building standards, this is not a reason for their demolition. More than 80% of the city’s buildings would fail to meet these standards. The government claims that there are technical hurdles to refurbishment that cannot be overcome, including the towers’ loadbearing concrete panel construction, the repairing of degraded concrete and the acoustic, thermal, fire and disability upgrades required. None of these issues are insurmountable.”

In conclusion the open letter demands an immediate moratorium on demolition, full transparency and release of the secret documents used to justify the demolition, independent and unbiased assessment of refurbishment and demolition alternatives, and full resident consultation and respect for their human rights.

But the appeal to the government to halt the demolitions until and if they can prove the necessity to knock the towers down, leaves the door ajar for the government to continue with its lies and disinformation campaign to justify the destruction of public housing.

The authors and signatories of the open letter must reject those tendencies and political outfits which accept the framework of Labor’s pro market agenda and seek to confine opposition to appeals for its modification, rather than its defeat.

The Greens and their pseudo-left allies, including Socialist Alliance and the Victorian Socialists, function as the chief political mechanism for tying genuine opposition to the demolition program back to the very establishment that is enforcing it. They promote the illusion that Labor’s assault on public housing can be halted through “pressure”—court appeals, parliamentary inquiries, media campaigns and moral denunciations—directed against a party that is consciously executing a profit-driven agenda on behalf of developers and finance capital.

By portraying Labor’s demolition drive as a policy mistake that can be corrected through better “consultation,” “transparency” or “evidence-based planning,” they conceal its real character as a calculated social counter-offensive to open inner-city land for intensified private accumulation. Their perspective keeps resistance trapped within the legal, regulatory and parliamentary channels that have facilitated the demolition from the outset, rather than directing it into a direct political struggle against Labor, its allies and the capitalist system they defend.

A crucial component of this fraud is the insistence that the trade unions, above all the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU), will—or can be forced to—lead the

fight. In reality, the CFMEU bureaucracy has from the beginning accepted the destruction of the 44 towers, limiting itself to token criticisms while ensuring that its members continue to staff Labor’s demolition and redevelopment projects. This is entirely in line with its broader record of enforcing Labor’s industrial agenda and suppressing any independent movement of construction workers.

The destruction of public housing in Melbourne is one spearhead of a wholesale assault on the working class being driven by Labor governments at every level. The same program is unfolding in other states through the sell-off and demolition of public housing, alongside a frontal offensive on jobs, wages, health, education and all the basic social conditions of life. Labor’s housing and “renewal” policies form part of a nationwide restructuring in the interests of big business, finance and the property oligarchy.

The way forward lies in the opposite direction to that charted by the Greens, the pseudo-left and the union apparatus. Architects, planners, engineers and other building professionals who oppose this social crime must orient not to lobbying Labor, but to the independent mobilisation of rank-and-file workers—above all on the sites where demolitions and rebuilds are being prepared. This means building committees in the towers, on construction and demolition jobs, in building materials, transport and logistics, and among students and young people, to coordinate a campaign that can halt work on the projects and block the destruction of any further homes. Such a struggle must consciously reject the framework of capitalist “urban renewal” and fight instead for a socialist program in which high-quality, fully funded public housing is guaranteed as a social right, not a sacrificial zone for developer profits.

We urge architects and all building practitioners to contact and join the Neighbourhood Action Committee established by the Socialist Equality Party to oppose demolition of public housing and take forward this strategy. Email: nacodpht.publichousingaus@gmail.com



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact