

Australia: Labor government targets the elderly in public housing tower demolition

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The state Labor government in Victoria is pressing ahead with its plans to demolish state capital Melbourne's 44 public housing towers. The program is the biggest destruction of public housing in Australia's history and will displace more than 10,000 residents, the vast majority of whom come from the most vulnerable sections of the working class, including immigrants, low-income families, those living with disabilities and the elderly.

As the next stage of the program, Homes Victoria has earmarked the destruction of seven public housing towers that accommodate elderly citizens. The towers are spread across six estates in Albert Park, Flemington, Kensington, North Melbourne, Prahran and St Kilda. This is more than half of the 13 towers dedicated to aged communities with on-site support workers for residents over 55.

Labor Housing Minister Harriet Shing announced in February that the second phase of the multibillion-dollar redevelopment program would fast-track the demolition of these seven towers. This marks a new and brutal escalation of the demolition process in the interests of the property developers, superannuation funds and construction giants that Labor is committed to enriching.

The demolition of the 44 public housing towers is aimed at clearing valuable inner-city real estate and handing it over to private developers. It is accompanied by policies that pump up demand in the housing market to benefit banks and major construction firms while doing nothing to provide genuinely affordable homes.

It cannot be separated from the broader class offensive being implemented by Labor at state and federal levels. Australian governments spend more on tax breaks for landlords than on the provision of housing, homelessness programs and rent assistance

combined.

Labor's destruction of public housing is a component part of a wholesale assault on the living and social conditions of the entire working class while billions of dollars are funnelled into the military to fund war crimes abroad amid an explosion of global imperialist violence led by the fascistic US administration of Donald Trump.

Shing confirmed that more than 600 of the most vulnerable residents of the city's public housing towers—some approaching 100 years old—will face forced relocation from communities they have lived in for decades. This will tear apart social networks and cut access to local medical support and the thin scaffolding of care on which they depend. About 70 percent of residents are 65 or older. The government plans to uproot them starting in July.

The response of residents is overwhelmingly anger and opposition to being moved from their homes.

One resident told the *Age*: "We were originally told by Homes Victoria early in the piece that the elder persons' high-rises wouldn't be impacted until the end of the [30-year] process. Now that timeline has been brought forward. They've got to realise we've got a lot of people who have lived here a very long time, who are close to medical support and family here."

The Housing For the Aged Action Group said it was concerned that some frail residents may not survive the shock of the process. "The impact of relocations on people in this age group cannot be underestimated," CEO Fiona York said in a statement earlier this year.

Shing cynically announced a new peer-support initiative called the "Hand in Hand Community Support Program" to link residents who have already moved with those currently in the towers to "offer reassurance." This is a fraud. What it will mean is that

a few handpicked tenants relocated from the first tranche of buildings to be demolished at Flemington and North Melbourne will be used to encourage the elderly residents to accept the fate that Homes Victoria has in store for them.

The way residents have actually been treated in the towers at Racecourse Rd, Holland Court and Alfred Street provides the opposite of “reassurance.” In the foyers of the targeted towers, Homes Victoria mounted a glossy advertising campaign to pressure them. Large photos of smiling residents accompanied statements saying “we’re here to support residents every step of the way.”

Residents suffered coercive relocation processes, incomprehensible paperwork and threats to their priority status if they refused unsuitable offers. Those without English as a first language were routinely denied interpreters. The residents in the elderly towers will be treated no differently.

A WSWS reporting team visited residents in the towers now earmarked for demolition.

Abdel has lived at the tower at 159 Melrose Street, North Melbourne for three years. He is a retired public sector disability worker who explained how he came to live in public housing.

“I applied to the Housing Commission in Broadmeadows and Coburg. They kept saying they would contact me every three months but they ended up saying it could be indefinite. I was on the waiting list four or five years. I lived with a friend who has a big house. Why don’t they do what some countries in Europe do? They give you a unit; you pay rent but it’s like your own money. After 10 or 15 years you own it.”

Asked why he thinks the government is demolishing the towers Abdel said, “Money talks. Companies build beautiful, expensive units—\$600k, \$900k for one unit. That’s what they’ll do here. Imagine this location—it’s beautiful, great views over the city. When they redevelop, they’ll build 15, 16, 17, maybe 20 floors and sell for millions. The government is shifty as well.”

Martin has lived at 29 Crown Street, Flemington for four years. He said, “I believe everyone here likes it. It’s very good. It’s peaceful. My doctor is in Ascot Vale [the neighbouring suburb]. I’ve been seeing him since I was 15. I’ve seen what the new places are like. They’re inhumane. It’s like putting people in a small box. You have to pay for water, and electricity is

through the roof.

“I used to vote Labor all the time but not anymore. You know why Kennett [former Victorian Liberal Premier] lost in 1999? Because they wanted to charge us full private rental. Kennett wanted us to go private because of the land. Get rid of the peasants, sell the property. They put all the pokies [electronic gaming machines] in the poor areas. I never played them. Everyone was down there and they’re doing all their money.”

Asked why the government is demolishing the towers Martin said, “In my opinion it just comes down to greed. It includes the Labor Party, the people contracted to make these dog kennels. It’s all about the dollar. At the end of the day, they get that nice fat check. We’re not human tenants or renters. We’re just a number.”



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