

Australia: Elderly residents of Melbourne apartment complex face forced eviction

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Twenty-five low-income, mostly elderly residents of the Oasis apartment complex in St Kilda—an inner suburb of Australia’s second-largest city Melbourne—face being forced to vacate what they were told would be “forever homes.”

In early March, residents in 25 Oasis apartments were doorknocked by staff from the community housing association HousingFirst and told their homes were too expensive to operate and would be sold. They were informed they would receive just two offers of alternative accommodation and that if they refused, they could end up on the street, a thinly veiled threat of homelessness.

Most are elderly or long-term low-income tenants who entered Oasis on the understanding that they could remain there for life. Located in the bayside suburb of St Kilda, the complex is close to shops, public transport, community services, parks and the beach. Oasis residents are starting to organise resistance, refusing to sign relocation papers and demanding to know why homes built and funded as low-income housing can simply be sold off.

One long-term resident told the WSWs that most people in the Oasis blocks “have been living here 20 years or more and they are part of the community,” and that there had been “a verbal agreement that we would be here for the rest of our lives.” She explained that she had waited years for community housing as a single parent and thought Oasis would be a home where her grandchildren could visit in the future.

Residents were given no genuine consultation, merely “a knock on the door” and then tightly controlled meetings with the CEO where only two tenants at a time were allowed to attend. “We were told this was our forever home, that we could stay here till we die.”

“The main thing is that we’re very disappointed that

they’re selling them off and that we have to relocate,” the resident said. “We don’t want to move out of our community. We’ve been told we’ve got two choices and if you don’t accept that well too bad, you’ll be evicted. We are starting to see that there’s a bit of a resistance so that’s good because I think initially they just thought that we would just go.”

The threat to Oasis residents takes place amid a housing crisis and the state Labor government’s program to evict around 10,000 people from Melbourne’s 44 public housing towers and turn prime inner-city land over to the property market. This is the largest destruction of public housing in Australian history and is being pursued in the midst of a deepening housing and cost-of-living crisis.

Evictions from the towers have already begun, with the first estates in suburbs such as Carlton, Flemington and North Melbourne largely emptied, and demolition works under way or prepared. The government’s own plans envisage turning the estates over to private consortia, demolishing the existing towers, and building triple the number of apartments over three decades, the majority to be sold on the open market and the remainder handed to community housing providers like HousingFirst.

The Oasis complex, completed in 2006, was built on a former council depot site gifted by the then City of St Kilda to a private developer on the condition that 10 percent of the 245 apartments be reserved for low-income residents.

In 1985, the St Kilda council created a housing program that eventually became the Port Phillip Housing Trust and Port Phillip Housing Association (PPHA), which in 2005 was handed ownership of 12 community housing projects then worth \$36 million. In 2018, PPHA rebranded as HousingFirst, now

controlling 2,300 dwellings valued at \$477 million, including 682 in the Port Phillip municipality and 25 at Oasis.

Far from being a cash-strapped charity, HousingFirst holds around \$130 million in investment properties, \$23 million in cash reserves and takes in \$28 million a year in rent. Private apartments in the same Oasis complex currently sell for around \$500,000 for two bedrooms and \$850,000 for three, meaning HousingFirst stands to pocket between \$10 and \$15 million from selling the 25 low-income units alone.

Over recent decades, successive Victorian Labor and Liberal governments have deliberately run down public housing while promoting “social” and “community” housing. In 2016–2025 (a period in which Labor has been the sole governing party) there was a net increase of just 36 public housing dwellings in Victoria, a drop in the ocean amid a deepening housing crisis.

Over the same period, community housing grew by 5,389 dwellings—from 14,236 to 19,625. Public housing is being eviscerated. To the extent that anything is being put in its place it is a grossly inadequate number of “community” and “social” dwellings managed by market-based community housing providers whose funding and operations are subordinated to financial imperatives rather than the social right to secure, affordable housing.

Rents in such housing are typically pegged at 30 percent of tenants’ income plus federal rent assistance, compared to 25 percent in traditional public housing funded by the state, while security of tenure depends on the balance sheet of the housing association.

Labor claims that demolishing public housing and replacing it with “mixed-tenure” estates, managed in part by community housing providers, will improve conditions and protect vulnerable residents. Oasis demonstrates that when profits and asset values dictate policy, tenants can be discarded whenever it suits developers and financial institutions. Any promises that public housing residents moved into community housing will enjoy long-term security are already exposed as lies by the decision to sell out Oasis tenants.

The government is acting on behalf of the banks and big business to slash debt and expenditure. Public assets, including housing estates on valuable inner-city land, are being cannibalised to satisfy the profit

requirements of developers, banks and large investors.

Appeals to the big business Labor Party or its allies in the union leadership courts are a dead end. Oasis tenants and the 10,000 public housing residents facing demolition must find support among workers and youth throughout Melbourne, across Australia and internationally. Construction workers are central to this fight: it is their labour that is required to empty the estates, pull down the towers and build the new private apartment blocks, and without their participation the entire demolition and privatisation program would grind to a halt.

The Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU) is enforcing Labor’s plan by keeping its members on the job and precluding any move to down tools and halt demolition works. If construction workers break from the CFMEU bureaucracy, organise independently at rank-and-file level and link up with public housing and community housing tenants, they could use their industrial strength to stop the clearances and demand that every home be retained and upgraded as high-quality public housing.

Workers must organise independently to insist that housing is a basic social right, not a commodity, and that all public and community housing be taken out of the hands of developers, financial markets and corporate-style associations. Society’s resources must be directed to expanding and upgrading high-quality public housing, as well as other social programs including education and healthcare.

The Socialist Equality Party has initiated the Neighbourhood Action Committee (NAC) to link tower residents with workers in construction, transport, education, health and other sectors in this struggle. Oasis residents, public housing tenants and all workers who agree with this perspective should contact and join the Neighbourhood Action Committee at nacodpht.publichousingaus@gmail.com and begin organising rank-and-file committees to prepare industrial and political action against every eviction.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact