Australia: Protester arrested in Sydney as Labor government starts demolition of public housing

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A 22-year-old demonstrator was arrested in Sydney yesterday, as the New South Wales (NSW) Labor Government sent in riot police to break up a protest encampment blocking the destruction of the Waterloo South public housing estate.

Some 60 cops stormed the site at dawn, dragging out the group of residents and protesters who have maintained a camp at the estate since May 24, when the site was fenced off in preparation for demolition work, even while at least 10–15 residents remained.

The police attack demonstrates the Labor government's determination to proceed with its plan to tear down around 150 homes by the end of June, as the first phase of demolishing all 750 homes in the estate over the next six to nine months.

Approximately 2,000 residents, many of them elderly, disabled or with serious health issues, will be turfed out of their homes. Longstanding communities and social support networks will be broken up as the vulnerable tenants are forcibly moved to disparate locations across the city.

Labor's aim is to drive the poor out of the city and free up the valuable real estate for private construction, creating a profit bonanza for property developers. The redevelopment will be overseen by Stockland, a private development company with almost $18 billion of real estate assets, which posted a statutory profit of $292 million in January.

There is no special rehousing process underway, and Waterloo residents are being given no say in where they will be sent. When public housing tenants are relocated, they are allowed to reject the first rehousing offer presented, but must accept the second, or they can be taken to court. This means residents will be forced into accepting whatever second offer they are presented with, regardless of where it is, or how much of an increase in rent is demanded.

The impending demolition of Waterloo South is the culmination of decades-long bipartisan plans to smash up the estate, part of an area that has been a hub for public housing for decades. The process began in earnest in 2014, under a Liberal-National state government, but is being brought to fruition by Labor under conditions of skyrocketing rent prices and a dire shortage of affordable housing.

According to the Audit Office of NSW's latest Social Housing report, in June 2024, there were over 56,000 households who had qualified for social housing but were on the NSW Housing Register waiting to be housed. More than 25,550, or 45 percent, had been waiting for more than five years, and of those, over 750 had been waiting for more than 20 years.

The shortage is only getting worse. In the 12 months to June 2024, only 8,000 households were housed, while 18,000 were added to the waiting list.

The Labor government's plan states "about" 3,300 homes will be built over a period of 30 years. A minimum of 30 percent will be allocated to "social housing," a maximum of 50 percent will be sold on the private market, and the remainder will be made "affordable housing." There is no indication of how much, if any, public housing will be made available after the "renewal."

"Social housing" is an umbrella term used to conceal the systematic destruction of public housing. The majority of social housing is made up of community housing, in which government-owned houses are managed by non-government organisations (NGO).

Depending on the deal struck between the government and NGO, rents are subsidised by the government either based on a percentage of the market rate, or the occupants' income. As a result, rents in community housing are often higher than public housing, which is based on income.

"Affordable housing" are privately owned, government subsidised properties, with rent prices capped at a percentage of the market rate, typically 80 percent. According to realestate.com.au, the median rent for a one bedroom apartment in Waterloo is $800 a week, making the "affordable" rate $640 a week and rising.

At 45 percent of the national median wage, that is far from "affordable" for most workers, and completely out of reach for people reliant on sub-poverty level government welfare payments. For example, the maximum total weekly disability support payment for a single person, inclusive of rent assistance, is just $710.

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The real purpose of so-called “affordable housing” schemes is to serve as a mechanism for pro-business governments to funnel public funds into the hands of wealthy property developers, under the guise of addressing the housing crisis.

In just one example, soon after taking office in 2023, the NSW Labor government, led by Premier Chris Minns, slashed planning regulations, fast tracking development approvals and allowing developers to construct taller buildings, as long as the proposed project sets aside 10–15 percent of floor space for “affordable” housing for at least 15 years.

At the same time it is subsidising developers on a vast scale, the NSW Labor government is intensely hostile to the welfare of public housing residents.

Speaking about the Waterloo South demolition, Housing Minister Rose Jackson told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, “those old style estates with thousands and thousands of public homes in the one place, they’re not functional communities. It costs money to deliver subsidised public housing and the government’s contributing millions and millions of dollars.”

Jackson’s words expose the true character of Labor as the party of big business and the banks. While enormous sums of money—and lucrative real estate currently occupied by the poor, elderly and infirm—are readily handed over to property moguls, public housing residents are being dragged out of their homes and told they are “dysfunctional” and an unacceptable drain on the economy.

This is line with the NSW Labor government’s attitude to the entire working class. Minns and others in his administration have openly denounced striking nurses and rail workers, and have imposed successive real wage cuts across the public sector throughout their term in office, with the help of the unions and industrial courts. On multiple occasions, the government has ordered massive police deployments to violently crush peaceful protests.

Moreover, it is part of an austerity agenda led by the federal Labor government. Last month’s budget slashed $63.8 billion over the next four years from social programs, including $38 billion from the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), stripping some 300,000 people with disabilities of all support, while cutting to the bare minimum the assistance provided to hundreds of thousands more.

While the Greens have publicly criticised the Minns government over the demolition of Waterloo South, they are attempting to present it as an isolated mistake, unique to NSW.

NSW Greens Housing spokesperson Jenny Leong recently declared, “This would not happen in any other state except NSW.” This is a blatant lie, most starkly exposed by the Victorian Labor government’s ongoing operation to demolish 44 public housing towers in Melbourne, displacing some 10,000 residents, for exactly the same profit-driven reasons.

Leong is covering for Labor because, despite their posturing, the Greens are a capitalist party, tasked with keeping opposition to Labor’s profit-driven assault on the working class trapped within safe parliamentary channels.

The pseudo-left group Socialist Alliance, which was closely involved in the setup and running of the encampment, have similarly presented the Waterloo demolition as an isolated aberration, disconnected from developments elsewhere in Australia or internationally.

The bankruptcy of their perspective of endless protest and plaintive appeals to the Labor government to correct its “mistake” is demonstrated in the response of that government: send in the cops and smash up the protest. A government that is ready to use state violence to facilitate the plans of property developers will not be dissuaded by moral arguments and polite requests.

A different perspective is required if the demolition is to be defeated and homes saved. That perspective must be not of appealing to the Labor government, but of waging the most determined political fight against it.

This struggle has to be connected to the fight for the broader interests of the working class as a whole, against cuts to wages, the cost-of-living crisis and austerity cuts, being spearheaded by Labor at state and federal level.

Waterloo residents should make a direct appeal to construction workers, who will be tasked with carrying out the demolition. There should be a campaign for a black ban on any work at Waterloo, until the entire demolition plan is overturned. Such a struggle can only go forward independently of, and opposed to, the union bureaucracies, which are tied by a thousand threads to Labor and its governments.

What is posed by the evictions is the need to oppose the subordination of the social rights of the working class to private profit. This raises the need for the working class to carry out the socialist reorganisation of society so that the wealth it creates is used to meet social needs, not fill the coffers of wealthy developers and big business.

Waterloo South residents can take their lead from public housing tenants in Melbourne who established the Neighbourhood Action Committee with the support of the Socialist Equality Party. Anyone interested in setting up a rank-and-file committee should contact the SEP today!

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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