

Australian Labor government backs demolition of Victorian public housing towers

Margaret Rees
13 September 2026

The federal Albanese Labor government has sprung to the defence of the determination of the Victorian state Labor government to demolish 44 public housing towers in Melbourne, despite a United Nations complaint and a legal challenge in the Australian High Court.

The UN Rapporteur for Adequate Housing Koldo Casla issued a letter in July posing objections to the demolitions. He asked the Australian government to provide information about the basis of the decision to demolish the towers and the resulting evictions and forced displacement of approximately 10,000 residents.

Casla also asked about the absence of prior meaningful consultation with affected communities, the lack of transparency or consideration of possible alternatives and the potential loss of public housing stock, as well as the adequacy of relocation arrangements, the absence of a guaranteed legal right of return and the possible impact on vulnerable groups and individuals.

Clare Walsh, the Albanese government's UN ambassador released a 15-page reply on August 25, reproducing to the letter the justifications of the Victorian government agency Homes Victoria. She asserted that Australia fulfils its human rights obligations under various international covenants, and that Homes Victoria is acting completely in line with these obligations.

In fact, residents were threatened that if they did not accept one of two relocation offers they would be relegated back to the Victorian Housing Register, where 80,000 people languish without homes for decades.

Walsh asserted the demolition will boost the number of people living across Homes Victoria high-rise precincts from 10,000 to 30,000. She did not mention that this would predominantly be wealthy purchasers of valuable inner-city real estate.

Labor's ambassador avoided Casla's question about the absence of prior meaningful consultation with residents, only referring to so-called negotiations with residents

after the fait accompli announcement of the demolition.

Casla's letter raised the lack of transparency for the decision. Walsh denied this. Yet Homes Victoria kept secret all the major documents on the decision to demolish the towers, using as its justification the need for Cabinet confidentiality.

Dismissing the failure to consider possible alternatives, Walsh advanced the Homes Victoria mantra that the towers have passed their use-by date, asserting this was effectively explained by MGS Architects' submission. That was a window-dressing document released to justify Homes Victoria's refusal to consider the possible alternative of retrofitting the towers, as proposed by Office Architects.

Walsh avoided the question about the potential loss of public housing stock. The reality is that demolition will eliminate public housing stock in 42 of the 44 towers. They are not going to be replaced by public housing, but 10 percent by so-called community housing with inferior rights, and 90 percent by privatised housing.

Rejecting the inadequacy of relocation arrangements, Walsh echoed Homes Victoria propaganda that it "has a renter-first approach." On the lack of a guaranteed legal right of return, Walsh claimed there was a right to return, but any return would not be to public housing but to outsourced community housing, which has higher rents and less secure leases.

Likewise, on the possible impact on vulnerable groups and individuals, Walsh's answer asserted that Homes Victoria has "operational procedures to understand the unique health and safety needs of renters and their household members."

The difference in terminology in the two documents is instructive. Casla's letter uses the term "residents." Walsh's reply almost continually uses the term "renters," which effectively dilutes the concept that they have any rights at all.

Casla wrote in his letter: “I am concerned that affected residents have primarily been treated as occupants of public property rather than as rights-holders entitled to participate in decisions fundamentally affecting their homes and communities. The lack of genuine consultation and participation of affected people in decisions about their homes raises serious concerns in relation to compliance with international standards.”

The UN rapporteur stated: “With around 30,000 persons experiencing homelessness, and 80,000 persons on waiting lists for public housing in Victoria, Australia and the Victoria State Government are already failing to ensure the satisfaction of the enjoyment of essential levels of the right to adequate housing to a significant number of persons in their territory in violation of the right to adequate housing.”

To camouflage Labor’s intent to hand over valuable inner suburban land to property developers, Walsh defended Labor’s blurring of the distinction between public and community housing, by labelling both as social housing.

She stated: “Social housing is made up of both public housing and community housing. Public housing is managed by the Government of Victoria, while community housing is managed by registered not-for-profit community housing providers. Despite differences in management, the eligibility requirements for public and community housing are the same.”

In reality, community housing is more expensive than public housing, has much weaker security of tenure and the non-government providers can cherry-pick applicants from the Housing Register, whereas public housing is allocated by length of time on the waiting list.

The Albanese government’s response also defies the still-to-be-decided legal challenge in the High Court, undertaken by Inner Melbourne Community Centre lawyers on behalf of tower residents.

This case is against the demolition of three towers, two in Flemington and one in North Melbourne. It was rejected by the Victorian Supreme Court at every stage from May 2024 to December 2025, and the High Court limited the appeal to the narrow ground of procedural fairness, that is, the lack of a fair hearing provided to the residents.

In opposition to Homes Victoria’s claim that “renters had a choice to leave” and freely did so, the residents’ lawyers argued that they were given no choice but to leave. “If tenants had choice, it was Hobson’s choice,” they submitted, referring to the lack of any real choice.

Demolition in the three towers has been halted until the High Court hands down its ruling, expected in October.

Even a positive outcome for the residents in the High Court will not prevent demolition. It would at best delay the process to meet the formal requirements of procedural fairness, involving some form of supposed consultation.

What is crystal clear, however, is that the Albanese government fully backs the plan by its state counterpart, now headed by Premier Ben Carroll, to carry through a wholesale privatisation of public housing, regardless of the basic legal and democratic rights of the public tower residents.

To halt the demolitions, an appeal must be made for support throughout the working class, including construction workers, teachers and health workers, who all confront battles against intolerable conditions.

The only force capable of halting Labor’s wrecking operation is the working class, mobilising independently of the trade union apparatuses, the Greens and the various groups that have sought to divert opposition back into appeals to the Labor governments and the courts.

This means building independent rank-and-file committees of workers, residents and their supporters to organise action, including against the companies involved in the demolition and the Labor governments themselves.

The demand must be raised for the allocation of billions of dollars for the construction of new high-quality public housing to provide for those on waiting lists and everyone in dire need of secure housing, with rents capped at no more than 25 percent of a household’s income.

That means a political struggle by the working class against the capitalist profit system and the refashioning of society from top to bottom on socialist lines. 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 developers.

The Neighbourhood Action Committee has been established by residents with the support of the Socialist Equality Party to spearhead this fight. We urge residents and their supporters to join us. Contact us at: nacodpht.publichousingaus@gmail.com.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact