

Australian public housing tower residents speak out against demolition

Our reporters
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Last week the Victorian Labor government stepped up its drive to evict hundreds of public housing residents who are refusing to leave their homes, which are slated for destruction. This is part of a privatisation strategy that will tear down all 44 high-rise public housing towers across Melbourne, displacing some 10,000 occupants.

The first tranche of the demolition plan involves three apartment blocks at the North Melbourne and Flemington public housing estates, as well as another two in Carlton that are already vacant.

On June 2 and 3, residents and supporters demonstrated outside the 33 Alfred Street tower in North Melbourne, preventing contractors from starting “concrete investigations” in preparation for the demolition. On June 4, similar protests were held outside two towers in Flemington, also resulting in the work being temporarily halted.

The work was to involve drilling through concrete in parts of the still occupied buildings, placing residents at risk of exposure to asbestos and other dangerous material. Workers were equipped with protective hazmat suits, while residents were told to stay indoors with the doors and windows shut. This effective confinement, while hardly sufficient to guarantee their safety, is hugely disruptive to their lives, interfering with their capacity to get to school, work or other commitments.

The Labor government’s order for commencement of work at the estates was a provocative attempt to intimidate the families who have so far refused to relocate. Their existence has already been deliberately undermined, with normal maintenance abandoned and their homes transformed into construction sites.

Meanwhile, residents report that representatives of the state public housing authority, Homes Victoria, are bullying families to relocate, with threats that if they do not accept an offer of alternative housing, no matter how unsuitable, no more will be forthcoming.

Kate, a resident of one of the two Flemington estate towers threatened with demolition spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the bitter experience of the recent Supreme Court judgment against the residents and in favour of Homes Victoria:

“Look what happened in the court. It is a slap in the face. The lawyers are going to appeal but I don’t know whether they can.

I was there in the court—nothing happened there to help us. They didn’t even listen to us as human beings.

“The judge said her opinion was that Homes Victoria is like the Reserve Bank [raising interest rates] and doesn’t have to consider the human rights of the people they affect.

“Then in just five minutes she said that we had lost the case, goodbye!

“A section of the community here said to us, ‘Please don’t go to the court. They are just the same as the government.’ When we came back after the decision, they said ‘we told you so.’ Our human rights are not respected.”

Kate referred to the vicious campaign in 2016 to demonise the teenaged children of refugees: “When the Somali children were in trouble and called ‘African gangs’ we stood up for them then, including in court.

“And now look at the young man in Footscray who was killed by the police. It is terrible, his mother lives in the flats. He had mental health issues.”

Tony is a resident of a tower on the Flemington estate not yet facing eviction.

“They are deliberately not doing repairs around here. And they deliberately took out big families from here and they’re putting in single people.

“It’s all about profit over people and it’s the land.

“What drives me crazy is when they said they were going to knock these buildings down because they were ‘unfit.’ They are very fit. Because I go to these new apartments, they are very small. Ours are bigger. When you close our windows it is really warm.

“We’ve got space. I’m a cleaner, I do other homes and I see how small they are compared to these ones. And so they claim, ‘we’re just doing you a favour because these are outdated, they’re not liveable.’ All we really could do with is air conditioning.

“There was an advertisement, as you entered in the buildings, ‘Vote for Labor. We will bring in air conditioning to all the buildings.’ I should have taken a photo. It was the election in 2022. Again, another lie.

“I like the community because I’ve got neighbours here that I know and my mother knew. So if I’m not around—I’m a single father—my children will get cared for and there’s someone out there for us. They’re breaking that community, and that’s unfair.

“This is going to create more homelessness and it’s going to obviously disconnect people from their community.

“They’re going to push people a lot further out. But you need people like us here, because we’ll do a lot of labouring jobs that inner-Melbourne people don’t do. You do need people here that do the jobs that, you know, someone like a doctor can’t do, but they need cleaners like me.

“I’ve seen some things on websites that refurbishing was a good idea. I mean, they were just renovated in 2011, it’s not that long ago. The biggest lie that upsets me, of all the lies, the government is saying, ‘we’re trying to give something better for the people.’ The reality is, it’s about privatisation and making money for the developers.

Toprak, a mother of three, agreed on the need to defend the community.

“We didn’t expect the announcement of demolition, no one did actually. It was a shock first and then we didn’t believe it would happen. They are privatising. They want to get rid of Housing Commission [public housing] altogether.

“I’ve lived here more than 36 years. It’s so comfortable. It’s so close to everything, I can’t complain. We women have known each other a long time and we get together for everything. Even with the vegetable shop, we had a very good friendship.

“When they want to demolish, they are separating everyone. It’s the destruction of the community. It is very sad.

“I’ve got three kids. My girl got married and moved out. My two boys are with me still here. The little one was born here. They’ve grown up here. They’ve got friends as well here. So we all know each other among Turkish people, and they’ve got friends as well from different communities. We like it here.

“Definitely, people need public housing, not private housing. Some can’t afford it and some can’t work.”

Kevin, who has lived in the towers for 16 years, said: “The older towers need a lot of fixing. They need to do servicing, especially the lifts. We have problems with the security door. They fix it, but they don’t fix it properly.”

Asked about the government plans to demolish the towers, Kevin said, “I think it’s a bad idea. Because there’s a lot of people—they are destroying the whole community. There are

those who have lived here for 25 or 30 years and then suddenly they have to move because the government has a new plan.

“It’s all about business, it’s not about housing and how they care about people or they care about the homeless.

“One of my friends moved from here to the new ones [nearby social housing]. He said ‘why is the price so high?’ He said, ‘you even hear your neighbours,’ they can say hello to each other through the wall. The neighbour can say, ‘okay, do you want some sugar?’

“I knew a lady who moved out from Flemington, but now she wants to move back. They might get a backyard, but they’ve got no community. Once you separate them, you will have a lot of problems, depression, the kids won’t be happy in school...”

“Most of the people here are refugees. They have come from overseas and they get to learn English in the community centres. When I came here in 1996 that’s how I got to know what’s happening in life and it was a benefit.”

Another resident, originally from Africa, said, “I don’t agree with demolishing the towers. I’ve lived here 27 years and I like this area. My kids were born here, went to school and university and it’s the only area I know and that I’m comfortable in. I’m very disappointed.

“They should renovate, not demolish. Some people I know from the other towers have been moved far away. They have kids in years 9, 10 and 11. By year 9, friends and teachers are very important for kids. These kids don’t know anyone and they are dropping out of the new school and that means they won’t finish high school or university.

“One lady here has five kids. To let her go to work for four or five hours, we look after her kids. Some parents work two or three days for eight hours. They can’t afford childcare, so when we look after their kids we don’t pay each other.

“When someone gets sick or has an emergency, they can knock on their neighbour’s door. We are a very warm community, it’s very important.

“The government doesn’t care. We need better housing and better education for our kids. We don’t want our homes demolished.”



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