

Australia: Disinformation campaign directed at public housing tower residents

Margaret Rees, Karen Maxwell
15 January 2025

Public housing residents in the Melbourne suburbs of Flemington and North Melbourne are being targeted by a relentless state Labor government disinformation campaign ahead of the planned destruction of their homes.

In an unprecedented assault on public housing stock, the government of Premier Jacinta Allen intends to demolish every high rise public housing tower in Melbourne over the next two decades.

The 44 public high-rise towers under threat currently house 10,000 people in 6,600 apartments. Most of these are in inner suburban areas, prime real estate that has long been targeted by corporate real estate speculators.

Tranche 1 of the government plan, slated to begin early this year, involves tearing down five towers in Flemington and North Melbourne, with the land given over to developers to build expensive apartments for private buyers. Only part of the new constructions will be allocated to social housing, which is typically more expensive and less secure than public housing allotments.

Numerous residents in the initially targeted towers do not want to move. Many are among the most vulnerable sections of the working class—the elderly, refugees, survivors of domestic violence and victims of substance addiction. The close community bonds, and local network of social service providers, that have developed over decades will be smashed up by the Labor government’s so-called redevelopment plan.

State government entity Homes Victoria has mounted a glossy advertising campaign to pressure residents into accepting that they have no choice but to accept relocation. To divide and rule the affected communities, posters featuring photos of some residents have been put up in the foyers and lifts of the targeted towers.

Accompanying text features honeyed phrases to sugar-coat the bitter pill that whole communities are being destroyed. One ad stated: “Homes Victoria is retiring older social housing high rises. There will be support every step of the way, from the choice to stay close, to helping you move.”

This is to foment the lie that the public housing towers are no longer fit for habitation. Independent architects have established that refurbishment of the existing towers is entirely feasible, contrary to government claims.

Homes Victoria’s boasts about help and support are also untrue. Residents cannot necessarily stay close to local amenities, and many have been offered alternative accommodation only in outlying suburbs such as Werribee or Kings Park, more than an hour away by public transport. Residents encouraged to move this far away include those with children attending local schools, who would have their education disrupted by such a move.

One public housing resident, whom we shall call Mary to protect her from potential reprisals, was angered by the advertising campaign. She told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “They came to us to ask us for interviews and to have our photos taken. They said they would give us money. If you said, ‘I don’t want a photo,’ there would be no money. They wanted the photos to prove that you are happy. Not only me—four or five of us said no to that.”

She spoke about the relocation drive: “The new social housing they are offering, they are too small. I’ve seen those places, you have to put furniture outside on the porch. The little rooms are very small. In the sitting room you would only fit a sofa, if you are lucky. The kitchen can only fit a small fridge. Are they going to buy a new fridge for us? No. According to where you

are moving to, you have to get new furniture and a new fridge.

“The people who have moved there have to come back here to even do their washing. And if you accidentally set off a smoke alarm when you are cooking, there will be a \$1,500 fine. A lot of people are crying. It is a disaster, to be honest. We have anxiety. We used to say hello to each other—now it is just, ‘Have you moved? What are you doing? Did they offer you a place?’

“People are unhappy and they are confused. Some people have been shown three or four places, but they are not near here, not near hospitals or schools. And if you have children at school, what are they going to do, move schools in the middle of the year?

“It is just money that the government is doing this for. But money is not coming with you to the grave. Are you rich when you die? I hate it. Today even if you’re working, you can’t afford rent. I’ve lived here over 20 years. This is my house. I was paying rent for those 20 years. Poor people don’t have any place.”

Mary also spoke about the implications for residents in the shift from public to so-called social housing: “With community housing, if you miss one day’s rent, they take you straight to VCAT [the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal, a disputes resolution body]. But on the other hand, if everything needs repairs, but they don’t fix anything, we can’t take them to VCAT. They tell us that in three or four years we can come back here. But then it will be community housing, not Housing Commission. I’m staying here.

“When you refuse, if you don’t want what they offer, they call another person, to try and make you agree.”

The Homes Victoria pitch is part of a sustained, corporate-led campaign against the public housing residents.

KPMG, a global accounting company, was paid more than \$150,000 to June 2024 for “High Rise Redevelopment Communications and Engagement—engagement with renters.” KPMG was also paid \$300,000 from May 2024 to December 2024 for “High Rise Redevelopment Market Research to provide strategic insights based on research findings.”

Think HQ, an advertising agency, was paid \$250,000 from June 2024 to September 2024 for: “Delivery of a campaign strategy (including advertising tactics) and associated content that supports the State

Government’s program of works related to public housing, in particular its commitment to retire and redevelop 44 high-rise public housing towers across inner urban Melbourne, also known as the High Rise Redevelopment Project.”

Residents of the public housing towers should not believe a word coming from the state Labor government or from Homes Victoria. They face the urgent task of forming a rank-and-file neighbourhood committee to fight for the basic social right of all to a secure, affordable and habitable home, against the government’s promotion of the profit interests of the property developers.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact