

Australian police confine Melbourne public housing residents indoors after COVID-19 outbreak

By Patrick O'Connor
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About 3,000 public housing residents in Melbourne, Australia's epicentre of the coronavirus pandemic, have been forcibly confined inside their homes.

The Victorian state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews announced at 4 p.m. on Saturday that the mandatory lockdown, to last at least five and as many as fourteen days, was effective immediately. Nine high- and medium-rise public housing towers, in the inner-city suburbs of Flemington and North Melbourne, have been classified as "detention locations," with all residents subject to the extraordinary quarantine measure.

Among the residents are the most vulnerable and oppressed members of society, including refugees, domestic violence survivors and people with drug and alcohol or mental health issues. Many arrived home on Saturday evening, after going shopping or visiting friends, to be confronted by dozens of police. Only residents were permitted to enter the buildings, and no-one is allowed to leave. Around 500 rotating police surround the public housing estates, with officers stationed on every floor of each building to prevent residents from stepping outside their apartments.

Public health officials recommended the public housing estates be quarantined after multiple outbreaks in the densely populated and dilapidated towers. There are 53 confirmed cases, but hundreds more people are believed to have been exposed.

The state Labor government opted for a police operation instead of having medical staff, social workers and people in the community lead the necessary preventive measures.

This threatens to inflict serious trauma on many people who have sought asylum in Australia after fleeing countries where they were subjected to police violence and arbitrarily detained. In addition, young people in the estates of African background are the victims of Victorian Police racism and harassment. The mass media and the government periodically whips up racist campaigns against them, most

notoriously the recent so-called "African gangs" press provocation.

Many residents are angry at being targeted. One man, of North African origin who did not want to be identified, told the *World Socialist Web Site* yesterday that he has been living on the Flemington estate for 20 years. He estimated that his high rise was now surrounded by 100–130 police, along with two or three police buses and many police cars.

"Everyone is saying that this should have been dealt with as a social security issue, with support for the population here," he explained. "It is quite appalling. Police rocked up at 4 p.m. and told everyone to go home and that they would have to remain locked up. People were scared—there is a history of police brutality here.

"For the first day we were just told by police to stay in our units. It would have been much better if there had been interpreters and people to assist with mental health issues. Most people were in the dark about what was happening and they were worried about groceries and food. Some people have casual jobs and were worried about their employment."

He noted the difference in treatment with neighbouring, non-public housing residents: "Near to us, about 200 metres away, are the ALT Towers that are 25–30 storeys high. These are privately owned, but nothing has happened there even though we go to the same park as the people who live there."

The state government's measures against the public housing residents—endorsed by the federal Liberal-National government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, in another display of COVID-19 bipartisanship—represent a class response. No other group of people have been targeted in a comparable manner—certainly not the upper-middle class layers in the wealthiest suburbs of Melbourne and Sydney who were initially the most affected by coronavirus after returning from their European and American holidays.

The state government has promised various support measures for the quarantined public housing residents, but

the initial provisions are inadequate.

People in the towers have posted photographs on social media of the first food boxes provided, which included some basic provisions like rice and cereal but omitted others, such as milk and bread, and did not have any culturally specific foodstuffs. Financial support is minimal—rents have been suspended, and there are “hardship payments” of \$750 for those without paid work and \$1,500 for those unable to go to work.

In contrast to the official response, ordinary working people have extended enormous support for the locked down public housing residents. A fund raising appeal organised by Trades Hall received \$286,000 in a little over 24 hours, more than the target amount.

The coronavirus public housing outbreak should have been anticipated—but few preventive measures were taken by the authorities. Residents have reported that as COVID-19 infections spiked upward in recent weeks, the only additional measure was the placement of a bottle of hand sanitiser on each ground floor. In at least one high rise, this reportedly ran dry within a week and was not refilled.

The threat of mass infection within the flats is largely due to there being communal laundries, narrow walkways and an absence of staircases, with only two lifts in the largest buildings. Breakdowns periodically leave only one working lift, making social distancing impossible.

The situation has been exacerbated by the deterioration of the flats themselves, the outcome of years of deliberate neglect by successive Labor and Liberal state governments. Many of the homes are grossly overcrowded, due to the inadequate provision of public housing. In Victoria, 80,000 people are on the waiting list for public housing accommodation. Many of the high rise apartments have leaking water, mould problems and other infrastructure issues, yet the necessary maintenance investments are not committed.

There is no doubt that the government would like to demolish the towers and sell the land to corporate property developers, as it has already at numerous smaller public housing unit blocks. The Flemington and North Melbourne high rise apartments are on prime inner-city real estate, comprising a significant portion of the \$21 billion worth of public housing stock controlled by the state government.

The wider coronavirus infection surge continues. Twelve postcodes in Melbourne’s northern and western working-class suburbs are in lockdown, with residents only permitted to leave their homes for specific reasons while remaining in the restricted zone, such as purchasing groceries, exercising and caring for family members. Police are patrolling these zones and questioning people entering and leaving.

The Australian Medical Association yesterday called for a “pause” in the lifting of restrictions across the country. There is little chance of this public health warning being heeded.

In April, the “national cabinet” of the prime minister and state premiers rejected a proposal by medical scientists and epidemiologists to eradicate coronavirus infections by maintaining national lockdown measures until late June. Instead, in what amounted to a social crime against the working class, the cabinet opted to allow a supposedly manageable level of COVID-19. In order to reopen the economy as fast as possible and allow big business to generate maximum profits, restrictions were prematurely lifted in May.

The *New York Times* global map of coronavirus “hot spots”—defined as the rate of new cases emerging in the last fortnight—now has Australia in the “red zone” category, alongside just six other countries (Croatia, Paraguay, Palestine, Namibia, Botswana and Kazakhstan).

Today authorities in Victoria announced the state’s worst ever daily infection increase, with 127 new cases. It was also reported that a 90-year-old man died overnight from COVID-19, and that the Victoria–New South Wales border will be closed from midnight tomorrow.

Morrison, backed by the Labor Party, has made clear that there will be no return to wider lockdown measures. This is in line with the moves by the Trump administration in the US, the Johnson government in Britain and multiple other governments internationally to permit COVID-19 to rip through working-class communities while corporate operations continue with minimal disruption.

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