

Oppose the Melbourne public housing towers lock-in! For a health and welfare response, not a police mobilisation!

By the Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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The Socialist Equality Party calls on working people everywhere to oppose the callous police-enforced “hard lockdown” imposed by the Victorian state Labor government on nine public housing towers in Melbourne and come to the aid of the 3,000 residents.

With barely 30 minutes’ notice, Premier Daniel Andrews’ government mobilised 500 police to surround the Flemington and North Melbourne housing estates and guard every floor in the 20- to 30-storey blocks to stop the residents leaving their small apartments.

Large families, as well as frail, elderly and unwell individuals, were suddenly subjected to arbitrary “detention orders” lasting up to 14 days. Even visits to doctors and other health services are forbidden.

There are no plans to evacuate infected residents or the many who suffer medical conditions that make them particularly vulnerable. This is despite warnings by health experts of the necessity for decent quarantine facilities where the residents can receive adequate care.

In effect, the residents are being locked inside already infected buildings, putting their lives at acute risk. Social distancing is impossible inside the often over-crowded flats—some home to many children—in the badly run-down buildings with communal laundries.

This lock-down parallels that at western Sydney’s Newmarch aged care home where 19 elderly people died in April and May after government authorities refused requests by their families to allow them to transfer to hospitals.

What is needed in Melbourne is a genuine public health response not a massive police operation. No explanation has been provided as to why 500 police

were deployed to flood the buildings, not doctors, health workers and counselors.

There is justified outrage among the residents at being treated like criminals. As one resident told the media: “We should have seen buses and cars full of healthcare and mental health workers and social workers, not the police.”

Nor has the Labor government offered any explanation for treating these people like no one else, even as it exempts big business workplaces and schools from the partial lockdown now re-implemented across Melbourne.

In fact, this is a class response. The residents are among the most impoverished and oppressed members of the working class, including traumatised refugees who have fled war, domestic violence survivors and people with drug and alcohol or mental health issues.

The actions of the Victorian government are a warning of the police-state methods that will be used more broadly against the working class as the pandemic worsens, jobs and conditions are destroyed, and social struggles erupt.

Working people everywhere are threatened by COVID-19 as a direct result of the profit-driven demand by big business and its governments for the full “reopening” of the economy, allowing the pandemic to spiral out of control around the globe. In Australia, infections have spread from warehouses, meat plants, factories, schools and fast-food restaurants into hospitals and now public housing estates.

This is a bipartisan offensive, with the federal Liberal-National government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison backing Labor’s police crackdown on the public housing residents to the hilt, even as the

“national cabinet” of federal, state and territory government leaders continues to lift safety restrictions across the country. As far as they are concerned, “living with the virus” is the price that must be paid—by the working class—for the restoration of corporate profits.

The COVID-19 danger has not arisen overnight. Residents of these estates, and throughout Melbourne’s more than 40 public housing towers, have for months demanded action to provide adequate cleaning and other hygiene measures, even hand sanitiser dispensers, only to be met with deaf ears.

Their treatment has evoked disgust and opposition throughout the working class. Thousands of people have donated funds, helped organise food supplies and sent messages of support via social media. To avert a public health catastrophe, this solidarity must now take an organised form.

The SEP calls for the formation of residents’ safety committees, both within the tower blocks and more broadly, to organise measures to protect the residents and the working class as a whole. Control over the situation must be taken out of the hands of the government and its police. Democratically-elected committees should develop a plan of action, guided by medical advice.

These committees need to be totally independent from government agencies and the trade unions, which have feigned support for the residents and raised donations, but refused to oppose the Labor government’s police lockdown. The unions have opposed any working-class struggle for decades, as successive governments have slashed public housing, leaving 80,000 people on the waiting list in Victoria, along with health and welfare programs.

The SEP proposes that the safety committees adopt the following essential demands and measures:

- Immediate withdrawal of all police.
- Evacuation of infected residents and their families to receive medical treatment and care in fully-resourced hospitals, clinics or quarantine facilities.
- Voluntary transfer of vulnerable tenants to decent and safe accommodation.
- Options for all residents to move into publicly-provided, first-class housing.
- Free medical, welfare and counselling services for all tower residents and public housing tenants.

- Guaranteed sick leave and full income for all infected and affected workers.

- Thorough cleaning and sanitisation of the towers and all public housing.

More broadly, there must be a massive public works program to build decent affordable housing for all.

Against the cry of “no money,” all the resources exist for these measures. That is shown by the \$575 billion allocated to expand the military over the next decade, and the more than \$300 billion in federal, state and territory bailout packages handed to the corporations, banks and big business.

This fight means organising the resistance of workers internationally, alongside rank-and-file factory, school and workplace committees. On every continent, there are growing numbers of strikes, job actions and protests by health, meat, transport, auto and other workers demanding safe conditions, against the employers and their trade union partners.

As all these battles show, the fight against COVID-19 is not just a medical one, but a political fight. It necessarily involves a coordinated global struggle of workers against the ruling class and its dictatorship over economic and political life. It is a fight against capitalism and for socialism—the complete restructuring of society on the basis of social need, lives and health, not private profit.

The Socialist Equality Party will provide all the assistance we can to those who want to establish such neighbourhood and rank-and-file workplace committees. We urge all those who agree with this perspective to contact us.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>