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Stop the Public Housing Selloff

Collective Action

February 14, 2018

The Victorian Labor government is planning to privatise nine public housing estates, selling off the land to private developers in a deal that would see only 50% of this land returned to public housing. It is unclear at this stage whether the government would own this 50%, or whether they would rent a certain number of apartments in the new developments to be used as public housing. It is no coincidence that the estates being targeted first are all located in the inner north suburbs with high property prices and as such lucrative expected returns on real estate development.

In an attempt to make the deal seem appealing to residents of the estates, the government has pledged to increase the number of public housing apartments on the estates by 10%. While this may be strictly true, the plans reveal that the size of the apartments will be smaller, and there will no longer be three bedroom apartments, only one and two bedrooms. This will have a significant impact on families, who will no longer have adequate space in the newly constructed apartments. So too will the new construction affect the communal areas such as

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parks and playgrounds currently on the estates, with these no longer existing under the proposed plans. Geophysical drilling has already begun at Ascot Vale, the largest of the estates and as such the one with the largest profit potential. This drilling is typically the first step in constructing high rise buildings.

Residents have already been visited by DHHS officers trying to get them to sign relocation agreements, which would effectively end their current tenancy and put them in an uncertain and precarious position with regard to their future eligibility and entitlements. This tactic has placed undue pressure on residents to sign, especially before having the opportunity to seek legal advice. Many residents have reported feeling pressured by the officers to sign these agreements, or that they had no choice and that signing was a mere formality. Thankfully with the involvement of the resources of the Public Housing Defence Network and local community legal centres, residents are being equipped with legal advice that will assist them in making the best decision for their individual situations.

Furthermore, these relocation agreements are vague and at best most only promise residents six months of accommodation, presumably in subsidised private housing. It is unclear what would happen to residents at the end of these six months. Many of these agreements offer unrealistic promises, such as indicating to tenants that they would be moved to the suburb of their choosing while construction takes place. This also raises questions as to why there are still so many people on the public housing wait list if the government has available accommodation for thousands of current residents on these estates during construction. And moreover, why the government refuses to build any new public housing unless current residents of these estates accept their deal and sign the relocation agreements. It is a blackmail situation, in which the government is attempting to force residents to go along with their grab for money and appeasement of developers who see these public housing estates as nothing more than big dollar signs. This would be a short

term gain for the government, while public housing residents lose out. With 35,000 people currently on the public housing wait list in Victoria, and another estimated 35,000 eligible to be on the waitlist, public housing should be a priority.

It is also worth discussing that these inner north suburbs are highly sought after because of their vibrant cultures and sense of community, which local people – including public housing residents – have helped to build and foster. This is one notable dimension of gentrification: working class people are pushed out of their homes, while those with the economic capital to purchase or rent in the increasingly expensive rental markets of these suburbs enjoy the fruits of working class labour. Many of the residents on these estates have lived there for years, some for over two decades. That they may be uprooted from the homes and communities they have built so developers – and those wealthy enough to purchase or rent these new apartments – may profit is appalling. This plan demonstrates the true priorities of the Labour government, who would see public housing diminished and residents losing housing security and community in favour of profits for developers.

The Public Housing Defence Network is connecting residents both within estates as well as across estates, in order to build a collective resistance to the selling of public housing to developers. The ongoing campaign is centered on public housing residents and their goals. It is vital that we support them in their struggle as we can, and resist these ongoing grabs for public housing and land. To get involved, follow the Public Housing Defence Network on facebook, help to share accurate information about the situation and campaign, and stay tuned for public meetings, rallies and snap actions.