



Construction Forestry Mining & Energy Union  
**Construction & General Division**  
 New South Wales Branch

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Dear Supporters for an Increased Public Housing Program

I want to congratulate the organisers of today's rally.

During the 1950s-1960s and a good portion of the 1970s, Australia could be reasonably proud of its public housing program.

However, since the mid-1970s, successive Governments have failed to adequately deliver sufficient public housing for those in our society who need such shelter.

The Property Council of Australia (which is not a group that is generally supportive of positions adopted by the Construction Forestry Mining & Energy Union) states that *"Governments failure to ensure an adequate supply of Public Housing has increased housing prices by 9% since 2001. Insufficient building of public housing has also been a significant factor in increased rental costs"*.

There is also a "Developer Strike" on at present, with 33,000 NSW Housing Lots already zoned and serviced, but these remain undeveloped - because it is not profitable to do so.

Wages have failed to keep pace with housing costs. From 1986-2007 earnings doubled, but house prices went up by 5 times.

Deregulation of the Labour Market has put more low income earners into casual and part time work, and forced other workers into sham contracting arrangements which has increased the need for public housing.

Rental stress is set at 30% of income. However, many low income renters pay well over that figure.

The CFMEU will consistently call on all Governments to focus on this most urgent issue, and to ensure there is an adequate supply of Public Housing for those in need.

Adequate public housing will not be achieved without returning to the levels of Public Housing that were ensured during the 1950s, 1960s and first half of the 1970s.

Yours in Unity

PETER MCCLELLAND  
 State President

Secretary Andrew Ferguson • President Peter McClelland  
 Unions NSW Your Rights At Work – Get Active – [www.nswrightsatwork.com.au](http://www.nswrightsatwork.com.au)



Photo by Roy Garner

A determined group of protesters rallied on November 5 in Sydney to demand a massive increase in public housing. The demonstration took place outside the Sydney office of Federal Housing Minister, Tanya Plibersek. Among the placards carried by participants included: "Make it harder for landlords and agents to bully tenants and jack up rents. Increase supply of low-cost housing – More public housing now!" and "Kevin Rudd and Tanya Plibersek: Not much money for housing for the poor, lots of money to fund tax cuts for the rich, to seize and imprison desperate refugees, to give grants to rich private schools."

The rally was held during work hours so that it would take place while Plibersek's office was open. Over thirty people participated in the protest including trade unionists, leftists, homeless people, public housing tenants and single mothers. Importantly, the demonstration was addressed by a representative of the CFMEU trade union. Rally chair, Sarah Fitzenmeyer, introduced him by saying:

In fighting for more public housing we need the power of the union movement behind us. Because it is workers who do the work that makes the profits for the ruling class. It is workers who have the power to collectively take on the rulers and win. Because workers are assembled in large numbers together at the workplace, they can discuss their experiences and the experiences of other workers and organise to take action. It is easier to organise action from the workplace than it is, for example, for tenants who live separately at many locations. With workers organising actions at their workplace it possible to unite together many groups and truly struggle for a massive increase to public housing so that there need not be any homeless person.

The union representative read out a letter of solidarity from the NSW state president of the Construction & General Division of the CFMEU. The solidarity statement noted among other things that:

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“Deregulation of the labour market has put more low income earners into casual and part time work, and forced other workers into sham contracting arrangements which has increased the need for public housing.

The November 5 rally was a united-front action drawing together groups from a diverse range of politics who, however, all agreed on the need to fight for a huge increase in public housing. In addition to supporters and friends of Trotskyist Platform, the initiator of the protest, also participating in the demonstration were two members of the EAST housing and community activist group, two supporters of the Communist Party of Australia and the leader of the prisoner rights group, Justice Action. The speech of Justice Action leader Brett Collins was well received. He noted that instead of building affordable housing, governments were building prisons. Collins also attacked the state Labor government’s COSP scheme whereby resources intended for genuine public housing were being diverted into complexes where recently “freed” prisoners would be cruelly housed in semi prison-like facilities.

Also addressing the November 5 rally was Tahera, a single mother of South Asian origin. She spoke powerfully of the hardships and discrimination she faced in trying to get decent affordable housing for herself and her young children:

... they rejected my request for emergency public accommodation. They said the queue is too long and there are no available places.

“But when I tried to get private rental housing it was very difficult. Every time I would go for a place there would be so many others applying for the same house. The real estate agents and landlords would reject my application because I was a single mother. More than one real estate agent openly told me my application would not succeed because I relied on Centrelink and child support for my income.

“If there was much more public housing available and of good quality, single mothers and other poor people would not have to go through such agony and humiliation. Single mothers, women fleeing violence and others in need would be able to get emergency public accommodation. And if there was more low-cost public housing, then even in the private rental market there would be much less people applying for each rental house and the landlords and agents would not be able to have the choice of discriminating against single mothers or Aboriginal people or other people.

In publicizing the protest in working-class suburbs, Trotskyist Platform comrades received much feedback from people who told us of their own experiences. People bitterly spoke of the years upon years spent in public housing waiting lists. Some angrily



Photo by Roy Garner

noted how they or their relatives had after many years of waiting been taken off the list when their incomes temporarily rose. A common complaint was also about how mentally ill people were dumped into public housing complexes with little care. As a result they were not able to take the right medication and could end up on the street or in jail. Left helpless without access to proper treatment, these ill people could then sometimes make life difficult for other public housing tenants as well. Often, their neighbours would try to help but, lacking the proper knowledge and resources, their efforts would be to little avail.

The Trotskyist Platform placards carried at the rally included: “Stop the use of water charges arrears to evict public housing tenants! Abolish water charges for tenants! Stop the evictions!”, “Whichever government administers the capitalist state cannot deliver for working class people. Win more public housing through mass struggle and union industrial action!” and “Over 100,000 homeless while billionaires own multiple holiday homes. Acquire dwellings for the homeless – Seize unoccupied mansions through mass action!”

In addressing the demonstration the editor of the *Trotskyist Platform* newspaper, Yuri Gromov, emphasised the following points:

The ALP government does not want to take on this big end of town and so it answers to their demands on nearly all issues - including housing policy. ... its program for social housing development is completely inadequate. In fact because governments are still selling off publicly owned housing, even official Housing NSW projections show that there will actually be less publicly owned social housing in NSW in June 2010 than there was in June this year. Less! That's the gurgler that public housing is going down into after all the government's spin. We have to demand: Stop all privatisation of publicly owned housing! Look at this Rudd government. It is neglecting the homeless, maintaining most of the anti-union measures within *Workchoices*, competing with the Liberals in cruelty towards refugees and upholding the murderous imperialist occupation of Afghanistan. The Rudd government is merely John Howard's government, Version 07. Unfortunately, however, Rudd is facing much less mass opposition than Howard did even though he is doing almost exactly what Howard is doing. This is because there are illusions in the ALP. That is why we must understand and help others to understand that this government is our enemy! And in there [*pointing into Tanya Plibersek's office*] is part of our enemy!

If we are clear on that then we will not hold back our struggle just to improve Labor's election chances. We will instead understand that the more powerfully we build our movements up now, the better we will be able to resist the attacks of whichever stripe of capitalist government that is in office.

Summarizing the perspective that is needed going forward, rally chair Sarah Fitzenmeyer made the following concluding remarks:

To win our demands we will have to mobilise mass action. We need the power of the trade union movement behind this struggle. It was terrific that the CFMEU was here today. We have to unite our struggle for public housing with other struggles in the interests of the masses – with the struggles for free quality public education for all, for massively increased funding for public health care, for jobs for all and for the defeat of union-busting. We have to rely on and trust only in our own power. Today is just the start of the campaign. I hope that everyone who came here to support the struggle will now work hard to deepen, broaden and intensify it. We have much hard work to do.

The rally ended with participants enthusiastically chanting: "More public housing! More public housing" and "Housing for the poor - Not mansions for the rich!"

In discussions after the rally and in the following days, many participants urged us to continue the campaign and step it up. It was suggested that the campaign is ready to go up a notch to having a march through city streets. The next action will likely be held during the daytime on a weekend so that more people will be able to attend. As well as demanding a big increase in public housing construction, it needs to emphasise opposition to the sell-off of existing public housing stock.