

Eighteen young fruit pickers killed in Australian hostel fire

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Eighteen young people, employed as casual fruit and vegetable pickers, are believed to have died when a backpackers hostel caught fire early Friday morning in Childers, a small farming town 315 kilometres north of the Queensland capital of Brisbane.

The Palace Backpackers Hostel, an ageing hotel converted into casual backpacker accommodation in 1993, was filled to capacity when the fire broke out on the ground floor at about 12.30am. It took more than an hour for firefighters to bring the blaze under control.

Fifteen bodies have been located while another three people staying at the hostel, but not registered, are missing. Their bodies are believed to still be in the remains of the 98-year-old two-storey wooden building. Of the known victims, seven came from Britain, three from the Netherlands, one each from Japan and Korea and three were Australian. They did not stand a chance in the blaze, which engulfed the building within 15 minutes. There was no sprinkler system, and the fire alarms and smoke detectors did not work. The only fire extinguisher on the first floor could not be found in the smoke. It was located in the manager's unit, on the opposite side of the building to the fire's source.

The hostel had 25 two and three-tiered bunks on the ground floor and a virtual rabbit warren of about 20 rooms on the first floor, with four or five people per room. Most of the 88 residents were in a deep sleep after working 12-hour shifts picking fruit and vegetables.

Some of the survivors reported that they were awoken by the sound of breaking glass, cracking timber and muffled explosions. They attempted to rouse other residents to escape through the smoke that had engulfed the building. An ambulance officer, one of the first rescuers to arrive on the scene, reported dense black smoke pouring out of the building before the first floor

erupted into a wall of flame.

Survivors told the media there had been no smoke alarm warnings. Keith O'Brien, a 22-year-old tourist from Britain, crawled to safety through a window after alerting a friend and saving a girl. Weeping at a church service for the victims held later that day he said: "The body count is disgusting. Why weren't fire alarms working? Why weren't there fire extinguishers? Why weren't there escape routes planned out? Why weren't there maps of how to get out?"

Queensland police have yet to interview the hostel owners but senior police officials have told the media that the blaze may have been deliberately lit by a disgruntled former resident of the hostel. Irrespective of the truth of these allegations, the tragic deaths are the result of the overcrowded conditions in the hostel, which are themselves the product of a cheap labour industry that is reaping substantial income and profits.

The Palace Backpackers Hostel, which is promoted internationally via the Internet, appears to be one of the better hostels. It is rated as four-star backpackers' accommodation. It is part of a growing network of facilities throughout Australia that are exploiting young tourists and unemployed people desperate for work.

The hostel's owners not only earned about \$1,300 a night by filling its rooms, they also arranged casual work for residents, providing transport to local farms. At least one recruiting firm hired directly from the hostel. Most of those paying \$15 a night for accommodation were employed for \$10.50 an hour in backbreaking work picking fruit and vegetables on more than 20 local farms.

Over the past decade, thousands of young people like those who died in the Childers fire have become a major component of the agricultural industry throughout the country. From Western Australia and all

along the east coast, south from Victoria to northern Queensland backpackers are performing low-paid seasonal work.

In Queensland alone, tens of thousands seek casual work each year. Childers, with a population of just 6,000 has a floating population of at least 200 young workers in picking seasons. Once locally-grown fruit and vegetables such as zucchinis and avocados become ripe, agricultural employers demand a rapid harvest from the backpackers. In fact, the picking continued the day after the fire, even though many of the labourers had friends killed, injured or rendered destitute by the blaze.

The number of low-budget tourists entering Australia increased dramatically during the 1990s, providing large profits for offering cheap accommodation. More than 352,200 backpackers visited Australia in 1998-99, spending over \$1.6 billion a year.

Since 1981, a total of 28 people have been killed in fires at backpacker hostels and other cheap boarding facilities. Nine died in 1981 at Rembrandt Apartments and six in 1989 at Downunder Hostel, both in Sydney's Kings Cross. Twelve perished at Palm Grove Hostel, Dungong, NSW in 1991. Backpackers narrowly escaped death after fires engulfed low-budget facilities in Rockhampton in 1996 and Melbourne and Fremantle in 1997.

Politicians offered various platitudes in the wake of the disaster, concerned at the impact on tourism and the supply of cheap rural labour.

Peter Beattie, Queensland's state Labor Premier foreshadowed an official inquiry to investigate the causes and examine the planning, licensing and fire safety issues. He declared there would be "no cover-up". Yet the fact remains that fire alarms and smoke detectors are not compulsory in Queensland. The Palace Backpackers Hostel had reportedly passed all inspections from government, council, fire and building authorities since 1993. The timberline building, a clear fire risk, was examined and given a safety all-clear only six weeks ago by the Berajondo Fire Protection Services.

Prime Minister John Howard expressed sorrow but immediately declared that Australia's tourist industry was a "very safe and reliable one". On the contrary, at least four hostels have been shut down in NSW over the last three years for failing to adhere to basic safety

requirements. Local mayors in Sydney have complained that many other dangerous facilities, some illegal, have escaped prosecution and that the problem is likely to worsen in the lead-up to the Olympic Games.



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