

Australia: Eleven die in Queensland house fire

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Eleven people, including eight children and teenagers, died in a tragic house fire in Logan, a southern region of Brisbane, on Wednesday night. The blaze, which began just after midnight, engulfed the high-set fibro and brick home within minutes, leaving the 14 people inside with little chance of escape. This is the worst fire in the state of Queensland since June 2000, when 15 young people died in a blaze at a backpacker hostel in Childers.

While police and fire investigators have not yet officially determined the cause of the fire, they have indicated that an electrical fault in a downstairs office might have ignited the blaze. Tau Taufu, one of the three men who survived, was reportedly working in the office shortly before the fire broke out. He went upstairs, smelt smoke through the floorboards and returned below to desperately try to fight the fire and rouse family members upstairs. He suffered burns in the process. Within moments, however, the fire was out of control.

When firefighters arrived some seven minutes later, the house was completely ablaze. Part of the top storey collapsed shortly after, thwarting any possibility of rescue and blocking escape routes for those trapped inside. Two vehicles outside the house were also engulfed in flames. Only three men escaped, two of them by jumping out of windows.

Three generations of an extended family of Tongan and Samoan descent were living in the house. The victims have been identified as Neti Lale, 42, and her children Jerry, 18, Paul, 17, Lafoa'i, 14, Selamafi, 10, and Richard, 8; and Fusi Taufu, 47, her daughter Anamalia, 23, and grand-daughters Ardelle Lee, 15,

La'Haina, 7, and Kahlani, 3.

Jeremian Lale, who lost his wife and five children, explained that the main escape route—a staircase—had collapsed. He jumped from a second-storey window, thinking that his family had already left the house. Clearly distraught, he told a press conference on Friday: “There was nothing I could do inside the house ... The fire and the smoke ... Can't see anything ... I keep calling my wife's name, my boys, my girls, no one answered. At that time, I thought to myself they are already outside.”

The deaths have evoked an outpouring of sympathy and support from ordinary working people. Dozens of relatives and members of the Pacific Islander community maintained a vigil outside the house while police recovered bodies. Flowers and sympathy notes have been sent to the site. Over 4,000 people attended a memorial service on Thursday night.

The response of the mainstream media and politicians, including state Labor Premier Anna Bligh, has largely been to present the fire as a senseless and unforeseeable tragedy with no broader social significance. In fact, the fire raises questions about the increasingly difficult economic conditions facing working people, and the adequacy of safety regulations that could have prevented the deaths.

Slacks Creek, where the house was located, and other suburbs of Logan City are among the most economically and socially oppressed in Australia. The official jobless rate for Logan is 7.1 percent but the federal government's small area labour market statistics reveal far higher rates for suburbs

neighbouring Slacks Creek—20.9 percent in Kingston and 21.1 percent in Woodridge. These are some of the highest rates in the country.

These conditions, and their social consequences, are ultimately the responsibility of successive state and federal governments, Liberal and Labor alike, which have carried through a program of economic restructuring involving the destruction of jobs in working class areas and slashing spending on essential social services.

The fact that two large families were living in a relatively small four-bedroom house points to the growing economic and social pressures facing working people. The Lale family reportedly moved in so that Neti Lale could care for her two sisters who required constant medical care. One required kidney dialysis and the other suffered from chronic diabetes. The family was due to move to nearby Kingston, having finally secured an appropriate rental property.

While the causes of the fire remain to be determined, a possible reason for its rapid spread was the presence of four liquid petroleum gas [LPG] cylinders below the house that were used for hot water and cooking. Police have confirmed that the cylinders did not explode during the fire, but are likely to have released gas via pressure safety valves, further fuelling the blaze.

Tofi Tusa, a relative of the family, told the *Australian* that gas bottles were used because of rising electricity prices that are placing new burdens on working people. Tusa said that he had been worried about the danger of fire on previous visits to the house. The use of gas bottles is reportedly widespread throughout the working class areas of Logan City.

Current legislation requires a licensed fitter to certify the installation of gas cylinders, but cylinders can be replaced without any follow-up maintenance or inspection for signs of tampering. Residential properties are allowed to install up to twenty-three, 45-kg LPG cylinders.

Master Plumbers Association of Queensland spokesman Adrian Hart told the *Australian* that

residents in disadvantaged areas facing financial difficulties were among the most likely to perform “do-it-yourself” gas bottle installations. He urged the state government to restrict the replacement of gas bottles to licenced fitters. It is not known when the gas bottles in the Logan house were installed, or what condition they were in.

Other questions as to whether the house had basic fire safety fittings such as smoke alarms are yet to be answered. Neighbours told the media that they did not hear such alarms.

Following the major fire that engulfed the Palace Backpackers Hostel in the regional Queensland town of Childers 11 years ago, a fruit picker was convicted for arson and murder. While he may have started the blaze, responsibility for the 15 deaths also rested with the hostel managers who had disabled smoke alarms, provided no functioning fire extinguishers and allowed only one exit from the two-storey building. The state government was equally culpable—it had failed to adequately inspect the many backpacker hostels that have sprung up to take advantage of young travellers looking for work in rural areas.

There is no reason to believe that the present Queensland Labor government’s record on ensuring fire safety in working class suburbs like Slacks Creek is any better.



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