

Protest in New Zealand city over earthquake recovery fiasco

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Up to 4,000 people protested outside the offices of the local council in earthquake-ravaged Christchurch, New Zealand's second largest city, on February 1. Protesters demanded mid-term elections and the removal of the mayor and council chief executive. Organisers said they would give the council a fortnight to respond to their demands. If no changes were made, further rallies would be held, and there could be a partial "rates revolt" to express dissatisfaction with the council's performance.

The trigger for the protest was a decision by the Christchurch City Council to award its CEO, Tony Marryatt, a \$NZ68,000 pay rise. The 14.4 percent increase would have taken Marryatt's salary to more than \$500,000. For Christchurch residents, many trying to cope without basic amenities, and struggling with issues over finances, homes and their futures, it was the final straw. Organisers decided to continue with the protest even after Marryatt eventually turned down the rise, saying the matter had been the catalyst for broader concerns about the council's performance and lack of transparency.

The protest organisers, a local businessman and the chairman of the Wider Earthquake Communities Action Network, were caught by surprise at the large turnout for the rally. People from all walks of life came to express their frustration over social injustices. Firefighter Kelvin Hampton, who had been closely involved in the earthquake rescue operation, told the crowd his annual pay was a lot less than Marryatt's rise and that firefighters, who have recently been on strike, had been without an employment contract for a year as they fought to get an offer above 2.7 percent from their employer. His comments received a huge cheer.

The protest took place almost a year after the 6.4 magnitude earthquake that devastated the city and many suburbs, killing 181 people and creating a social disaster. It was the worst of a series of destructive earthquakes that began in September 2010 and were followed by thousands of aftershocks that continued through this Christmas.

The destruction includes 20,000 homes, 1,250 commercial properties within the city centre and 300 outside it. Hotel accommodation, the convention centre, major sports stadiums and scores of historic buildings were either severely damaged or collapsed altogether. Utilities, including power, water, sewage, roads, schools and the university, remain in disrepair. Many key buildings are still to be demolished, while one central shopping district has been temporarily reconstructed using shipping containers. Entire areas of the city are being abandoned, leaving vast tracts of wasteland surrounding those residents who are left behind. Days before the rally, bulldozers had begun demolishing houses in working class eastern suburbs.

The slow pace of repairs and the costs of rebuilding are causing increasing anger. According to Earthquake Commission (EQC) estimates, 100,000 houses need repairs but only 7,000 have been completed. It will be 2014 before even 80 percent are finished. The entire process is fraught with frustration for homeowners. Some still do not have operating toilet facilities. Others are caught in a seemingly endless cycle of disputes with property assessors, the EQC, private insurers and the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority. As with post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans, many who are seeking to build new homes cannot get insurance cover.

Job security and unemployment are serious issues for residents struggling to rebuild their lives. Tourism and education have been hard hit. The University of Canterbury (UC) is proposing to eliminate 351 academic and non-academic positions, about 18 percent of its staff, over three years. This follows 100 layoffs last year. Student numbers at UC dropped by 13 percent last year while the number of international students, a major source of revenue, fell by 21 percent. Hundreds of school teachers face losing their jobs as enrolments decline and the government refuses any special provision to retain staff and operational funding. Food producer Sanitarium last week announced cuts to 36 jobs and the indefinite suspension of some manufacturing lines due the unsafe condition of its plant.

The conservative National Party-led government has sought to divert the blame onto local authorities. Local Government Minister Nick Smith held a well-publicised “crisis meeting” with elected councillors on January 27 and demanded they “focus on the city’s recovery”. Smith appointed a special observer and put the council on notice to sort out its affairs.

The current and previous governments are equally culpable, however. Business demands for “small government”, elimination of “red-tape”, pro-market local government “reforms”, cuts to expenditure and privatisation of essential services have affected every facet of social administration. The result has been lax building standards and enforcement, the running down and financial plundering of the EQC, inadequate insurance provision, planning failures and a refusal to adequately fund recovery measures.

Recent evidence given to the Canterbury Earthquake Royal Commission has confirmed that the destruction could have been significantly mitigated had local and central authorities made better preparations. New Zealand, which sits on the Pacific “ring of fire”, is an earthquake-prone country. There had been previous warning from scientists about the possibility of a major quake hitting the city, yet most buildings, even newer ones, did not meet recognised standards.

Recent testimony before the inquiry focussed on the response of the authorities between the first quake in September 2010, which caused considerable damage, and the major disaster that followed it in February 2011. The process for assessing the structural integrity and safety of buildings between the two events was deeply flawed.

Last week, the inquiry examined the deaths of three men who were killed when they were sent to work in an unsafe building. They were recovering a pipe organ from a Methodist church when it collapsed in the February quake. The church had been so badly damaged in September it was considered too dangerous to occupy, yet no measures had been taken to inform the workers the building was compromised.

A relative of one of the victims told the inquiry there had clearly been a “breakdown in the process” in the decision to let the men into the church to work. “We believe the safety aspect has been underrated as a whole, and that it will be up to the inquiry to bring that out,” the witness said.



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