Australia: Bankstown council shuts fire victims out of meeting

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Hundreds of displaced residents of the fire-damaged Euro Terraces Building B in the southwest Sydney suburb of Bankstown continue to be treated with contempt by the local council.

Last night, the Bankstown City Council did not hold its regular monthly open meeting and instead held a closed door meeting with the mayor, councillors and council officials. Security guards were posted outside to keep out residents who had come to ask questions. The open meeting had been advertised on the council's website for the fourth Tuesday of every month.

Over 300 residents of the 10-storey apartment building, many with young children, remain in temporary accommodation—living with friends or in motels—following the intense fire in a fifth-floor apartment on September 6. Twenty-one-year-old Connie Zhang was killed and her friend Yinou Jiang, a fellow Chinese student, was seriously injured when they were forced to jump from a window to escape the blaze.

Hundreds of other residents in the neighbouring Euro Terraces Building A, and elsewhere in the five-building apartment complex, are still living in fear that a similar disaster could occur at any time.

A number of residents came expecting to attend the scheduled council meeting, after the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) issued a statement demanding free, emergency accommodation for the residents of Building B and to insist on answers to the life-and-death questions raised by the tragedy.

The questions included: "How was it that Bankstown City Council approved Building B when it clearly had substandard fire doors, an atrium roof that trapped intense smoke inside the building and no sprinkler system?" Another stated: "The Council has claimed it issued fire safety compliance orders for Euro Terraces. When? What issues were raised in these compliance orders? Were they complied with? If not, why didn't the Council act to enforce them?" (see: "Demand Bankstown council provides accommodation and answers for Euro Terraces residents")

Bankstown council has refused to accept any responsibility for the inadequate fire safety in the building or the plight of the residents. They have now been told that it could be more than two months before they can return to their homes.

On Monday, the council issued a perfunctory "Information Update," claiming that there was no scheduled public meeting and declaring that the SEP statement contained "incorrect information." The update asserted that the council "did not approve the construction of 4 West Terrace or its occupation." It failed to answer any of the questions raised by the SEP.

The council update simply referred residents requiring assistance to the same agencies that have previously failed to address their concerns. In other words, Euro Terraces residents will not receive, and should not expect, any assistance from the council.

Students, workers and other Building B residents have had their lives turned upside down. Scores are living in intolerable conditions. Accommodation support depends on whether owners or renters have private insurance but in many cases is completely inadequate.

Several residents came to the council meeting last night to voice their concerns. One said he had received the

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council's "Information Update" on Monday but had decided to come "because I don't believe anything they say." He said he was "not surprised by anything they do."

Vari, a medical science worker from India, said she was "disgusted" with the council's response. She had stayed at the homes of four different friends since the fire.

"I went to the council's information centre and it was useless. I went from table to table and they offered me psychological assistance and a $120 food voucher. I don't need a psychologist, I need accommodation. And what can I do with a food voucher if I haven't got a kitchen?

"The only accommodation offered was for a maximum three nights at a hotel or motel. This could be anywhere in Sydney, and after three nights I'd have to move somewhere else. I don't have a car, so how do I get to work?

"I have no family here, I'm a single woman. What am I supposed to do? I came here to have a better life in a first world country but I look like walking the streets with no home."

Nazih and **Samar**, a young Lebanese couple who had been renting a Euro Terraces apartment, said they were staying with a relative. "There are nine of us in the two-bedroom home and it's impossible," Samar, who is studying to be a teacher, said. "I'm doing an internet education course and can't do any of it in this situation."

Nazih, an electrician, said he had many questions for the council. He had found another apartment for his family and wanted one question answered: "When can I move out?

"We've found another place, but I'm not allowed to get my furniture out of the building. It's ridiculous. They won't let me use the lift, they won't let me use the stairs and I can't get my bond back until there's been an inspection."

Nawaf, a PhD student from Saudi Arabia, said was he was "very disappointed with council's attitude." He said his wife, also a student, was six months' pregnant. The couple, who have a nine-month old baby, is staying at a motel.

"Before I came to Australia I was told that it was a good place and that if things went wrong for people the government would help," Nawaf said. "But this hasn't happened for any of the people from the [Euro Terraces] apartment block. I have to complete my thesis in child protection by the end of the year, but I need internet access and a place to study. The situation is very difficult for us."

Building B residents have been given only limited access—10-15 minutes, two days a week—to obtain their clothes, medical supplies and other vital possessions. They recently learnt that the contents of their refrigerators had been dumped, without their permission.

Angry comments have been posted on a Facebook page. One resident wrote: "I have taken to driving 5 hours to stay with family. I have stopped my work and studies and was only given 3 days at [a] disgusting hotel with my baby.

"I moved to Euro Terraces to give my baby nice living. We can't move in and we can't move out either… It's time to stop shoving us around. Obviously I won't be there [at the council meeting] as I'm far away but I hope someone can be my voice."

Another resident commented: "I want to know who the hell has given authority to go through my things without permission or warning! And decide what they should empty my fridge and God knows what else they touched! That is still my home!"

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