

Australia: After Bankstown apartment fire, residents demand answers

Our reporters

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Euro Terraces residents in the Sydney working-class suburb of Bankstown spoke with WSWs reporters last weekend following the fifth-floor apartment fire, which damaged Building B on September 6. The blaze took the life of Pingkang “Connie” Zhang, 19, and seriously injured her friend, Yinuo Jiang, 27. The young students were forced to jump 15 metres to escape the inferno.

Scores of other residents were trapped in the 10-storey block by dense smoke before they were rescued by Fire and Emergency NSW officers. The block, which was erected in 2009, has been the subject of a number fire safety compliance orders since February 2011.

Twelve days after the disaster, up to 400 people remain locked out of Building B, pending structural checks and various fire safety measures, including the removal of the atrium roof. A statement issued by NSW police yesterday said that repairs and various fire compliance measures would take “about four weeks” and that residents could not return until this work was inspected by Fire and Rescue NSW and Bankstown Council officers.

Building B residents, many of whom are living with friends or relatives, fear that it will be much longer. Those from the 96-apartment block are only allowed 10-15 minutes in the building, under escort from security guards, to retrieve medicines, clothes or other necessities.

The indifference of local authorities to the plight of Building B residents was highlighted yesterday when the Bankstown City Council suddenly announced the closure of an information centre for Euro Terrace fire survivors.

Bankstown City Council general manager Matthew Stewart claimed that a “drop in numbers” seeking help meant that those affected had “been able to source the information and assistance” they needed. “The residents have received a flyer with contact information if they require further assistance.”

In reality the centre provided very limited help. The council established it five days after the blaze and only in

the face of growing anger by residents over the lack of support. None of those locked out of their apartments were warned in advance of the shut down.

Apartment owners are currently receiving about \$500 per week rental assistance from the apartment complex’s strata insurance while private rental residents are only provided \$280 weekly or \$40 per day. These amounts are completely inadequate, especially for those with young families. Short-term rentals for furnished apartments are expensive and difficult to find in the area.

Jose, a long-term Building B resident, found accommodation in Dulwich Hill. He works at Chipping Norton and said that the longer commute to his job was difficult for him and his wife. Residents should be given “the same quality” accommodation, he said, as their previous apartments.

“I don’t know all the details about the insurance policy and the legal issues but it’s difficult to find decent accommodation for a short period ... and this is going to cost us more than what the insurance companies have given us,” he said.

Albert and his wife have lived on the first floor of Building B since the apartments were approved in 2009. They are currently staying with relatives while trying to locate a furnished apartment to rent.

“We weren’t told anything about fire safety problems,” he said. “It was approved by the Bankstown Council and that’s why we settled on the deal. We wouldn’t have moved in otherwise.”

Bankstown City Council has insisted that the atrium roof on Building B, which trapped dense smoke in the building and prevented access to fire escapes, was not in the original plan and that the local government body knew nothing about it.

Albert bluntly rejected these claims as did other long-term residents we spoke with. “What are they talking about? It was there when we moved in at the beginning,”

he said.

“The council has got a few questions it needs to answer, Albert said. I left my country—Lebanon—to get away from all sorts of political under-the-table stuff but the same thing is going on here.”

Lydia and her husband Jimmy are owner/occupiers. They said that the rental insurance assistance (approximately \$70 a day) was inadequate. “The best alternative accommodation we can find is a cheap motel at \$140 a day night,” Lydia said.

She also asked questions about the atrium. “The council wants to remove the roof, which it says was not on the plan,” she said. “Is this true or not? If it is, why did the council approve it from the first day? And at the end of the day, the extra amount [to fix damages] will come into our household. The strata fees in our first year were \$430 and now are \$750, that’s just in three years!”

Jimmy said that changes were only being made because someone had been killed. The situation in the apartments, he added, “would have gone on and there would have been a bigger tragedy with many more killed.”

Asked about the lack of sprinklers in the apartment block, he replied, “There are loopholes everywhere. They only have to put them in buildings over 25 metres so the developers make the block just a bit less than this. The council can then say they haven’t broken the law. The law is there to protect them, not the people who live here.”

Lydia demanded to know whether anyone would be held responsible for the building and fire safety violations. “I want to have an answer to this question and what the solution will be.... The laws should be strengthened so that people who buy property can check if everything is right,” she said.

Asked to comment on private certifiers paid by developers being used to approve buildings, Jimmy said the main responsibility rested with the government and the local council.

People will blame the certifiers, he said, but “if you give a gun to a monkey and it shoots someone, who do you blame—the monkey or the person who gave him the gun?”

Residents in the adjoining Euro Terraces Building A told WSWs reporters that they were worried about their own safety. They had been told nothing by the government authorities or their landlord, St George Community Housing, about the fire or what it had revealed about potential dangers inside the complex.

Building A residents are all community housing tenants. As low-income earners, they qualify for various levels of

government subsidies, without which they could not afford to live in Sydney’s expensive rental market. Several tenants said they were also concerned about the same lack of adequate fire safety measures revealed in Building B—no ceiling sprinklers, ineffective fire safety doors and faulty fire detectors.

One tenant, an injured truck driver, said he had phoned St George Community Housing to ask what it was doing in response to the fire tragedy. A representative had merely visited to check the internal fire alarm in his apartment, and said that a meeting of residents may be called in the future. “I want to move out of here, but I can’t afford to live anywhere else,” he commented.

Another tenant, Nazih, said he had witnessed a fire in the building’s underground car park just a few months earlier. He had been forced to use a fire hose to extinguish the flames because the sprinklers in the car park had failed to work.

“We had just come home, and we had the kids in the car. Someone had lit a fire in a bunch of rubbish, just near the lift, and thick black smoke was billowing out everywhere. We could not see the light—that’s how thick the smoke was. I had to grab the fire hose to put it out. That’s something that might raise some concerns.” Nazih said that neither the building management nor the landlord had done anything to fix the car park sprinklers.

“We have been told nothing at all [about the Building B fire],” he said, and no official notification of any changes to make the buildings safe. Asked whom he held responsible for this situation, Nazih replied: “The developer, whoever put the money into this and, of course, the governments that allowed the building to be constructed this way.”

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