

Australia: Official wall of silence over Bankstown fire

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More than a week has passed since a fatal apartment fire in the Sydney suburb of Bankstown but there is still no official explanation from New South Wales fire and emergency authorities on what caused the blaze that tragically killed Pingkang “Connie” Zhang and seriously injured Yinuo Jiang on September 6.

The young Chinese students were forced to jump 15 metres from a window ledge in a desperate attempt to escape an intense fire that engulfed their fifth-floor apartment in the early afternoon. According to one fire-fighting official, the fire’s heat reached 1,000 degrees centigrade.

Scores of people in the 10-floor building were trapped by dense smoke and flames and had to be rescued by fire crews. Many were hospitalised for smoke inhalation. There was no sprinkler system in building. Under the Building Code of Australia, buildings less than 25 metres high are not required to have sprinklers.

Hundreds of residents from the apartment complex remain locked out of their homes as engineers examine the building’s structural safety. Residents have been told that this could take up to a month, possibly longer. Those in an adjacent complex—Euro Terraces Building A, which was also erected in 2009—are still living in that building.

Residents have not been told what caused the fire, why it rapidly became so intense, what would happen if a fire erupted in their homes and whether the inadequate fire safety measures in this or adjacent buildings will be rectified.

In fact, an official wall of silence has been erected, with police, fire and emergency authorities and the Bankstown City Council refusing to provide any but

the most rudimentary information.

Contacted this week by the WSWs, these agencies all claimed that no details could be released because an investigation was underway, pending a possible coronial inquiry.

However, a spokesperson for the New South Wales (NSW) attorney-general’s department told the WSWs that a coronial inquiry could not be held until the coroner’s court received evidence from the police investigation and an autopsy report, which could take six months. There was “no guarantee”, moreover, that this would lead to a coronial investigation. Even if one were held, it could be up to 15 months before public hearings began.

Many questions remain unanswered, but it is already clear that sub-standard construction codes, dubious building certification and inadequate fire safety policing contributed significantly to last week’s tragedy.

The 10-floor block, known as Euro Terraces Building B, not only lacked sprinklers but the Silky Group, the builder, apparently made changes to the originally approved construction plans. These modifications included a roof on top of the building’s atrium that trapped and concentrated smoke and heat from the blaze and made it difficult for residents to evacuate.

The blaze was so intense that everything in the fifth floor apartment was incinerated, concrete peeled away from structural steel in the walls, and floor tiles in nearby corridors on the fifth level were detached and shattered. Once the fire took hold and breached the apartment’s entrance door, it operated like a blowtorch, funnelling into the central atrium and threatening the entire multi-storey block.

Euro Terraces was reportedly the subject of fire safety compliance orders by the NSW fire and

emergency service and Bankstown City Council over the past 18 months, beginning in February 2011. According to a Channel 10 news report last Saturday, the defects included difficulties finding the fire control panel, missing items in alarm systems, blocked fire escapes, fire exit doors not operating properly, no signage for water hydrants and missing signs on exit doors. There were also orders to upgrade the basement air pressure system.

Bankstown City Council and Fire and Emergency NSW categorically rejected requests by this reporter for information on the compliance orders—what they were, whether they were carried out before the fire, and if anything was done to ensure they were implemented.

This information could not be released, we were told, because it would become coronial hearing evidence. If there were no such inquiry, a Bankstown City Council spokesperson said, the information could be obtained only through a Government Information Public Access (GIPA) freedom of information request.

According to the Channel 10 report, some but not all of the faults were rectified. The obvious question is why not? Is the official stonewalling simply to cover up for the failure of the fire service and local council authorities to force the developer to modify the building to provide adequate fire safety or alert residents of the dangers they faced?

The council spokesperson insisted that the Bankstown City Council bore no responsibility for the building modifications to the original plan because they were authorised under the private building certifier system, which allows developers to hire inspectors to issue occupancy and safety certificates.

Barry Johnson, who certified the Euro Terraces, claimed last week in the media that when he approved the building in April 2009 there was no roof on the atrium. Who certified the building for compliance with the fire safety requirements is another question that must be answered.

According to the September 11 *Daily Telegraph*, Johnson was prohibited from issuing fire safety certifications following two reprimands by the Building Professionals Board, relating to fire safety matters. In 2008, he was fined \$7,500 for issuing an occupational certificate for another building that was “not fit for occupation” and did not have fire reels.

The system of private certifiers, paid by developers,

is part of the broader shift to “self-regulation” throughout the economy, allowing companies to cut corners in meeting construction, environmental, safety and other government codes. In 2008, the former NSW Labor government increased the powers of private certifiers to authorise buildings as fit for accommodation.

The role of the state governments—Liberal and Labor—in NSW raises further questions. The Labor Party, which held office for 16 years until 2011, was notorious for its shady relations with property developers, real estate speculators and their financial backers. From 1998 until 2008, the NSW branch of the Labor Party received over \$13 million from developers, who became a major source of the party’s election campaign funding, especially for the 2003 and 2007 state elections.

The silence of the current state Liberal government and the Labor Party, which has controlled the Bankstown City Council for many years, on the circumstances of last week’s tragedy is another demonstration of their contempt for working people. Whether it is the lack of safe, affordable accommodation or any of the other pressing social needs facing workers and youth, both parties act in the interests of the corporate and financial elite.



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