

Australia: Hundreds of Bankstown fire survivors remain locked out

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While the smoke has cleared from the ruined apartment where a fatal fire occurred in the Sydney suburb of Bankstown on September 6, a litany of problems continues to plague residents and others affected by the blaze.

The more than 400 residents of the Euro Terraces building have been forced from their homes, with minimal or no support from government authorities. Many unanswered questions also remain about the inadequate fire safety measures in the 10-floor complex, and the responsibility of the local, state and federal governments for permitting them.

A young Chinese student died and a fellow student was seriously injured after they were forced to jump from a window of their fifth-floor apartment in a desperate bid to escape the flames. Horrified residents revealed that the still-new building, completed in 2009, had no fire sprinklers, faulty fire alarms, a central atrium roof that trapped the smoke from the fire and a record of poor inspections of shoddy fire safety devices.

Yino Jiang, who survived the fire after jumping, remains in hospital, with her condition now described as stable.

A delegation of about 15 former Menai High School class mates of Pingkang “Connie” Zhang, who tragically died in the fire, came to the apartment block yesterday afternoon to pay their respects to the young woman. They quietly laid bunches of flowers at the building’s entrance, some of them weeping, and spent several minutes on the street, just below where Zhang jumped to her death.

Talent Xim told WSWs reporters: “We left school about two years ago but have kept in contact with each other and were really saddened by her death and so we all decided to come down here.

“She came from China, was the smartest in our year, and was going to have success in her life and then this terrible, terrible thing happened. But to be honest, from everything we know about this building it was like an accident that was waiting to happen.

“It’s ridiculous that there are not sprinklers in this building. How many residents are there in this building? Probably hundreds. And you’ve got to remember, this is a migrant suburb and there’s a lot of people here from around the world, so there are many issues involved in this situation.”

There were heated scenes on Monday afternoon after scores of residents began arriving at the building to try to gain access and assistance. A handful of security guards on site were overwhelmed by the numbers. Residents began to get angry at the difficulties of getting inside and the lack of information about how long they would be left without homes.

Bankstown City Council, which had decided on Monday to shut the building indefinitely, pending safety inspections and repairs, was forced to hastily convene a meeting in the nearby Bankstown Senior Citizens Centre in an attempt to quell the anger.

Council, emergency services and welfare agency officials attended the meeting, agreeing to turn the senior citizens hall into an information centre, but

proposing little else. Residents were originally told it would take approximately one week before they would be allowed back into the building; then told it could be a month, possibly longer.

Council officials later told WSWs reporters that residents were not eligible for federal or state welfare assistance because the tragedy was not a natural disaster. Instead, the homeless residents were advised to seek help from the Salvation Army.

At a media conference on Tuesday, officials confirmed that residents could only return to their apartments for 10 minutes, under a security escort, during the appointed hours of 2pm to 5pm. Before the conference opened, there was an angry exchange between a council official and one of the residents, Muneef Albasha.

Asked about the lack of information or support from the council, the official defended its record, claiming: “We haven’t been involved until today ... We’ve been called in to assist you because you have received either no information or some info through the strata management.”

Albasha then asked: “If it’s not safe to live here from the beginning, why do they let people live here?” The official flatly denied any council responsibility, saying a private certifier had signed off on the building’s construction, then refused to comment any further, saying that a coronial inquest would be held.

On Wednesday morning, about 100 residents queued outside the apartment building waiting to be escorted inside. On the same day, Bankstown Council general manager Matthew Stewart reiterated the indefinite closure. “At this point in time, how long until people can get back into the building is certainly a matter for the builders and the insurance company,” he announced.

Residents have been told to stay with relatives or friends, or find cheap accommodation. Some have been offered just \$40 a night reimbursements by insurance companies. For many tenants, including students and immigrants, there is little or no assistance. Kiki, a

resident on level 8, told the WSWs: “We’ll get nothing ... they just say you don’t need to pay the rent.”

Boom, the tenant of the first-floor apartment where the two fire victims fell onto an outside landing, said she was distressed and very angry. “There should be proper fire safety where people live,” she said. “I’ve heard that there were things done here that were wrong and made the fire worse.

“I never realised that this place was not safe and it probably means that the other buildings here are the same and could be dangerous. People shouldn’t have to live in places that are unsafe.”

Boom, who migrated from Thailand seven years ago, said there should have been fire sprinklers in the apartment block. She referred to Bangkok’s Santika Club fire, in which over 60 young people were killed and hundreds injured on January 1, 2009 in a venue with no sprinklers and only one fire extinguisher.

Boom explained that she was now sleeping on a friend’s floor. “I came down here today because I asked my real estate agent if they could get a mattress for me and they said no. They just laughed at me. I’m very angry about this. Normally I wouldn’t say anything, but this is wrong. I don’t want a freezer, washing machine, just a small mattress.”



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