

Residents condemn Bankstown council and Labor Party

Our reporters
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Bankstown residents spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* last weekend about the role played by the federal, state and local governments in creating the conditions for the September 6 apartment building fire. In particular, they commented on the responsibility of the Labor Party, which controls the federal government, formed the New South Wales state government from 1995 to 2011, and has dominated the Bankstown City Council for many years.

The Bankstown City Council falsely denied that it approved the Euro Terraces apartment complex where the tragedy occurred, when in fact it did so in 2003. Together with the federal and state governments, the council also washed its hands of any responsibility for providing temporary accommodation for the displaced residents, despite informing them last week that it will be at least another month before they can move back into their homes. Moreover, there is no guarantee that the known safety defects in the complex--the faulty alarms, inadequate fire doors and lack of fire sprinklers--will be rectified, leaving the residents fearful for their safety.

The former state Labor government presided over the de-regulation of the building approval process that permitted the Euro Terraces developers, Silky Constructions, to hire its own private certifiers to sign off on the building's completion in 2009, without any council inspections. The federal Labor government is responsible for the Building Code of Australia, which requires no sprinklers for buildings less than 25 metres in height, and also subsidised the construction of Euro Terraces via one of its post-2008 stimulus packages, the National Rental Affordability Scheme, designed to bail out the property developers, construction companies,

banks and finance houses.

Referring to the Chinese student who died trying to escape the fire, **Joyce**, a long-time resident of Bankstown, said: "That poor girl, what a tragedy! It was a disaster waiting to happen. The council should have inspected the building. And apparently what was built on top--the roof over the atrium--was not allowed.

"Now it will be about a month before the people can get back into their homes. I don't like what is happening," Joyce added. "The developers have all got money." As an example, she pointed to another nearby apartment block. "When that building over there was built, the owner built one storey extra. The council said it fined him \$330,000, which would have been the price of one apartment, but they didn't make him knock it down."

Joyce said she had voted Labor all her life, but would not do so again. Her comments reflected wider disaffection with the Labor Party, which was defeated in an historic landslide at the 2011 state elections, and barely retained control of the Bankstown City Council in last month's local government elections, winning only 6 of the 12 seats.

"When the council elections came up, I didn't vote for any of them, because they only look after themselves," she said. Asked about her attitude to the Labor Party, she declared: "Get rid of them! I've been Labor all my life, but now I'm disillusioned with everything. I don't know where this country is going."

A young receptionist voiced similar sentiments. "It was sad that this happened--that these girls had to jump

out of the window. There should have been some safety procedures and evacuation equipment in the building.

“There should be regulations to prevent fires like this. Governments should not allow developers to get around the red tape. They put occupational health and safety regulations on business buildings; the same should apply for new residential buildings, like the one where this fire occurred. If the government did the right thing in the first place, this situation could have been avoided, and people might not have died.”

The young worker deplored the fact that governments had allowed the dominance of “money-hungry” people, who “put money in their pocket.” She also condemned the ongoing cuts to the fire service, which arrived too late to save the Chinese students. “They [governments] should look after the fire service. They shouldn’t cut it so much. They should look after the public.” Asked to comment on the Labor Party, she replied: “I was told that Labor used to look after the people, but with all this happening, I don’t know anymore.”

Rueben, a railway worker and long-term resident, originally from the Philippines, pointed to a litany of problems revealed by the fire. “There should have been fire escapes, and the fire brigade should have been there earlier. But that’s only the end-result. The building code should have been applied as well.”

Reuben insisted that answers had to be provided. “Somebody should be accountable for this. Why was this building approved? If the council says that it didn’t approve it, who signed the papers? Doesn’t the council have to do that? Don’t they have building inspectors? I don’t think the council was doing its job.”

The railway worker pointed out that all working people were affected by the high cost of housing, forcing them to live in cheap, sub-standard buildings. It’s the way we structure our government, so that no one is accountable. It’s for the rich and famous, basically. The law leans toward the people with the money. It’s always the working class that gets affected, and has no say.”

Told that the Bankstown fire station had only four

men on duty at any time, Reuben was shocked. “That’s no good!” he declared. “We should get a bigger budget for them.” He had experienced similar cuts in the railways. “The Labor Party won’t be around much longer,” he commented.

Wassim and **Huda**, formerly from Iraq, live close to the building and saw the fire. “We feel very sorry about this incident,” Wassim said. The couple had many questions. Wassim asked: “How could this building be built, just three years ago, and be approved by the council? Is there no engineer? How could they allow the building without some basic safety features? I am surprised.”

Huda added: “There should have been fire escapes outside, like there are in buildings in other countries. Because the life of people is very important, more important than other things. This is all just for business, to make more money. People are losing their lives. Why?”

The couple commented that such building standards would not have been permitted in their home country. “Even animals should not be treated like this,” Wassim said. “Prevention is better than treatment. How can we build buildings in the proper way? This is very important.” He continued: “The authorities should also check the fire safety regularly. Is the equipment working, are the signs functioning? They should check and inspect every building.”

Huda explained their son is an architect in Canada. “We know how much care should go into making a building safe,” she said. “It should take many months of checking and consultation. The government should not permit buildings like this to be advertised as safe. People’s lives should be protected.”



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