

SEP calls public meeting to initiate investigation into Bankstown fire

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)

5 October 2012

The Socialist Equality Party is calling on workers, young people and all those concerned about ever-deteriorating social conditions for working people, to attend a public meeting on October 15 to initiate an independent investigation into the circumstances surrounding last month's fire in Euro Terraces Building B, in the Sydney working class suburb of Bankstown.

The fire rapidly engulfed a fifth floor unit in the complex, reaching such intensity that aluminium window frames began to melt. Two young Chinese students, trapped on a window ledge, were forced to jump for their lives. Connie Zhang, 21, died in the fall and her friend Yinuo "Ginger" Jiang, 27, was seriously injured. Many local residents witnessed the shocking scene and remain deeply traumatised as a result.

From the Bankstown City Council to the state and federal governments, authorities at all levels have already washed their hands of any responsibility for the disaster, while the victims have been treated with official contempt. Residents have been given no information about the cause of the fire, on the grounds that a coronial inquiry may be held, which, even if it is, will not be convened for at least six months, and possibly several years.

Meanwhile, more than 300 workers and students, including both tenants and owner-occupiers, have been forced to leave their homes indefinitely, with no alternative accommodation and virtually no income support. Residents in the neighbouring Building A, along with many hundreds in three other multi-storey blocks in the complex, live in fear that they could face a similar disaster. Like their counterparts in Building B,

they have no idea about the safety status of their own homes.

An official cover-up is already underway. The O'Farrell state Liberal government and the Gillard federal Labor government have maintained a deafening silence. For its part, Bankstown City Council has refused to release any fire safety compliance orders it issued to the Euro Terraces strata management, or to explain why such orders were not enforced. Yet it is already clear that, to all intents and purposes, there were no fire safety measures in the 10-floor Euro Terraces Building B that could have prevented the blaze. The building lacked a sprinkler system, its fire alarm system was faulty and the fire doors were inadequate. Many other questions remain unanswered, including how the fire could take hold, spread and reach such intensity so quickly.

Every aspect of the Bankstown fire points to the subordination of the interests of the working class to the profit requirements of big business. Cheap, shoddily-built apartment complexes have sprung up in working class suburbs throughout Sydney and around the country during the past decade. Property development, like mining, has been one of the few engines of economic growth since the global financial crisis erupted in 2008. Like a pack of vultures, banks, financial institutions, developers, and construction corporations have seized on the chronic lack of affordable housing to make quick and easy profits at the expense of the millions of workers and students who desperately need a place to live. Every tier of government has actively colluded in ensuring that the speculative boom continues, driving up prices, especially rents, while slashing quality and standards.

Building codes and safety regulations have been systematically weakened and deregulated to maximise returns. Thanks to state government legislation, private certifiers paid by developers, not council building inspectors, determine whether a building is fit for habitation. No-one has yet clarified, for example, who certified the central atrium roof at the Euro Terraces complex, which was apparently not in the original design, but which trapped the thick black smoke that blocked an escape route for the residents.

The issues raised by the Bankstown fire affect the working class as a whole. According to one estimate, more than two million people in the state of New South Wales alone live in buildings with inadequate fire safety. As the economic crisis deepens, the political, economic and social conditions that led to the disaster will only intensify. Workers, students and young people, not only in Bankstown, but around the country, need answers to what are life and death questions. These can only be uncovered through an investigation that is entirely independent of the official political establishment, and which seeks to reveal, not just the immediate causes of the fire, but the complex web of relationships between councils, property developers, construction companies and banks with state and federal governments that condemns workers to live in badly built, poorly designed and overcrowded accommodation.

Safe and affordable housing is a basic social right, along with high quality public education and health care for all. Under the capitalist profit system, however, the most basic and fundamental social needs of the vast majority are routinely sacrificed on the altar of the private profits of an ultra-wealthy few.

The SEP is holding this meeting as part of the struggle to develop an independent political movement of the working class against the capitalist profit system. We call on all Euro Terraces residents, workers, unemployed people, students and youth to take a stand and attend. We also appeal to building workers, fire fighters, council and legal workers, along with others who have specialist knowledge of the accommodation crisis confronting the working class, to come forward

and help clarify how and why the Bankstown tragedy was able to occur.

Baptist Church Hall
Corner of Stanley and Leonard streets
Bankstown
Monday October 15, 7 pm



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Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact