

SEP public meeting calls for Bankstown fire investigation

Our reporters
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A public meeting in Bankstown organised by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) last night voted unanimously for the establishment of an independent committee to investigate the real reasons behind the fire at the Euro Terrace apartments on September 6 that claimed the life of Pingkang “Connie” Zhang and seriously injured Yinuo “Ginger” Jiang. The meeting heard two reports from SEP members, outlining what is known to date. This was followed by an extended discussion in which audience members raised their concerns and asked questions about the causes of the tragedy.

The first speaker was Mark Church, a member of the International Students for Social Equality, who has written for the *World Socialist Web Site* on the fire and its aftermath. He focussed his remarks on building laws and regulations that had undermined safety requirements. Church pointed in particular to the introduction of “performance based reviews” and “alternative solutions” under the Building Code of Australia, and the introduction of private certification, which allow developers to construct lower quality and more dangerous buildings. “Such a state of affairs,” he noted, “is the product of the watering down of building standards by the state and federal governments.”

Church pointed to the close connections between the Australian Labor Party and property developers. He explained that the stimulus program of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s Labor government had not been designed to create jobs but to assist the construction companies and the banks. This had led to an anarchic state of affairs in building construction, where profits were generated at the expense of safety and quality. He said that it was important to investigate these factors because, “if one building has been found to be dangerous, there can be little doubt that many others are in a similar position.” Bankstown Council had approved the original plans for the Euro Terrace apartment building, but now denied any responsibility for the safety flaws that contributed to the fire.

SEP assistant national secretary James Cogan dealt with the political and social issues raised by the disaster. He explained that an independent investigation was needed

because the official parties would not expose the vested interests of the developers, builders and government institutions. He condemned the callous disregard of the Gillard government for the survivor of the fire, Jason Zeng, whose deportation to China was an abuse of his democratic rights. It also prevented a crucial witness from being questioned.

Cogan pointed to some of the contributing factors to the tragedy, including the cuts to fire services and the plight of international students, who are often compelled to reduce their housing costs by living in unsafe accommodation.

Cogan illustrated the growing accommodation crisis facing many workers and young people with a series of slides showing the rising cost of housing relative to income. The statistics graphically showed the huge financial pressures on the working class, especially new home buyers or renters. These included:

- * Between 1997 and 2007, governments slashed the number of public housing properties by 30,000, even though the population grew by over 2 million. There are 173,000 people on waiting lists for public housing.

- * Between 2006 and 2011, rents rose at twice the rate of inflation. More than 740,000 renters reported that they experienced significant financial hardship during 2011, such as not being able to afford food or other vital necessities. More than 380,000 home owners with a mortgage reported similar experiences.

- * Between 2003-04 and 2009-10, the amount households spent on housing increased by 55 percent, more than any other expenditure item.

- * For first home buyers, the average home loan was three times average annual income in 1996. By 2011, the average first home loan was six times average income.

Cogan made the point: “People do not voluntarily live in a house that they think may not be safe—they do so because they have no financial alternative.” He continued: “The fire was not the product of a god or of nature, it is the product of definite relations within the capitalist market, in which a small minority benefit from and profit from the exploitation

of the majority, including the denial of decent conditions and standards of living.”

The speaker explained that society could only be changed and social equality achieved by wresting control of society’s productive capacity and wealth out of the hands of the capitalist minority. An independent political movement of the working class had to be built that consciously fights for a workers’ government based on socialist and internationalist policies, which will place the banks, the major industries, the construction companies and the property developers under public ownership and democratic control.

“We are proposing to you tonight that we form an independent committee to investigate every aspect of the fire in Euro Terraces Building B. We cannot rely on Labor, or the trade unions, or any other pro-capitalist organisation. The working class has to take matters into its own hands and start fighting for its interests. The truth about the fire will help workers and young people across Australia and around the world understand the forces they are up against and the revolutionary struggle they have to carry out for socialism,” he said.

Following the reports, the meeting was opened up for questions and contributions. Many in the audience welcomed the opportunity to raise points, questions and concerns that they had about the fire and its wider implications.

First to speak was Terry Li, Connie Zhang’s boyfriend, who movingly described the events of the day and related his own thoughts as to the cause of the fire. He explained that when Connie rang him when the fire first broke out she sounded calm, explaining that the air conditioner had caught fire. In a second phone call only a few seconds later, it was clear that the situation was terrifying and that the girls were in imminent danger. He told the meeting that for the girls, “from the first call to jumping was only five minutes, they had only 20 seconds to escape.”

He asked the question, “How could the fire have developed so quickly?” He outlined his belief that the potentially dangerous proximity of the electrical and gas lines in the apartment was the likely cause, as only a gas fire could have created those conditions. He also told the meeting that neither the police nor any other authority had asked him for his version of events.

One participant stated his disgust at the “gutless immigration people” who deported Jason Zeng and asked what could be done to investigate. He explained that he “felt responsible” for what had happened. Cogan responded by saying that workers and residents were not responsible for the fire. The blame lay with the corporations and politicians that built and authorised the building and their role must be exposed, he said.

One person asked whether units in the neighbouring Euro Terraces building A were also at risk. A number of people indicated that could well be the case, and should be investigated. Another person asked whether residents could be helped through parliamentary elections.

Cogan responded by pointing out that elections had brought changes to government but nothing had changed for workers. The state Liberal government had come to power in a landslide victory in part because of widespread disgust at the naked collusion between Labor and property developers. However, the new government continued where Labor left off.

In response to a suggestion that an appeal should be made to current affairs programs on television and radio announcers like Ray Hadley, SEP national secretary Nick Beams rose to explain that the media had no interest in properly exploring the issues raised by the Bankstown fire. It would exploit the tragedy for 5 seconds of sensationalism before dropping it entirely. A real investigation would require more consistent and persistent work, which was why an independent committee to examine the reasons for the fire had to be formed. He called on the meeting’s participants to join the committee.

The resolution proposing the formation of the committee was read out to the meeting. One question was raised about whether a coronial inquiry should be respected. The meeting chair pointed out that any coronial inquiry, if it was held at all, would be confined to the narrowest possible grounds and would inevitably be a whitewash. While it might identify the immediate causes of the fire, it would leave untouched those who were ultimately responsible, in particular the vested interests of government and the developers.

The resolution was then put to the meeting and passed unanimously. Participants donated generously to the SEP’s monthly fund and a number signed up for the committee. Informal discussion continued well after the meeting concluded.



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