

No decision on coronial inquiry into Bankstown fire for months

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More than seven weeks after the Euro Terraces fire in Bankstown, there is no guarantee that a coronial inquiry will be held into the death of Pingkang “Connie” Zhang who was forced to leap from a fifth floor apartment.

In answer to questions from the *World Socialist Web Site*, the New South Wales attorney general’s department indicated that it would be at least three months before a decision was made as to whether to hold an inquest.

The brief email received on Thursday read as follows: “Regarding your inquiry, the Brief of Evidence [is] still outstanding and the P.M. [post mortem] report [is] outstanding. It is unknown if an Inquest will be undertaken at this stage, probably best to check back with us at the end of January for progress update.”

Hundreds of residents of Euro Terraces have now been told by the Bankstown City Council that they will be able to move back into their apartments on November 12. But they will do so without the benefit of a public inquiry into what caused the fire, why it spread so rapidly or therefore if their homes are safe.

The fact that a post mortem report and a brief of evidence, based on police and emergency service investigations, have not been finished and forwarded to the state coroner highlights the low priority given to this deadly fire.

A coronial inquiry, which has the power to summon individuals and question witnesses under oath, might not be held at all. According to the Australasian Coroners’ Society web site, although state coroners

investigate the circumstances surrounding all “reportable deaths” and can examine “fires of public significance,” this is not automatic. Inquests into disasters like the Euro Terraces fire are rarely held.

As the web site states, “After examining evidence, such as medical reports and witness statements, a Coroner may decide that an inquest is not necessary. In fact, only a small number of deaths reported to the Coroner will actually result in an inquest. The majority of matters will be concluded by way of a finding in chambers.”

From the start, the residents of Euro Terraces in the working class suburb of Bankstown have been treated with indifference and contempt by every level of government—local, state and federal. It is not difficult to imagine the response if well-to-do residents of a high-rise block in one of Sydney’s wealthy suburbs had been forced to jump to escape a fire. There would be a clamour in the media for a public inquiry.

The reaction of all government agencies has been to close ranks and wash their hands of all responsibility for the disaster, while refusing to provide any significant welfare support or assistance. Profits—not human lives and the right to decent, affordable and safe housing—are their prime concern.

The Labor Party-controlled Bankstown City Council immediately insisted that it knew nothing of, and did not approve, changes to the Euro Terraces block. The addition of an atrium roof trapped dense smoke inside the building. Facing angry residents without a place to live, the Council told them to contact local charities or their insurance companies.

The Council cancelled its scheduled monthly meeting on September 25. When residents attempted to attend a closed-door meeting between the mayor and the councillors to ask questions about the disaster, they were barred by security guards.

Today the Bankstown City Council announced that residents could safely return to their homes on November 12 because restorative repairs had been made and the atrium roof had been removed. They are supposed to do so, however, on the word of the same Council that took no responsibility for safety in the apartment block prior to the fire.

As revealed by the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the Bankstown City Council had issued a series of orders concerning fire safety at the Euro Terraces apartments, but not all were carried out. Today's announcement did not even raise the issue of a sprinkler system, which could have prevented the rapid spread of the September 6 fire.

In the almost two months after the disaster, neither the federal Labor government nor the New South Wales Liberal government has issued official statements on the tragedy.

NSW Planning Minister Brad Hazzard told ABC radio a day after the fire that safety issues in the building could have been "contributors to the circumstances, it's just too early to know". He claimed that high winds appeared to play a role, but has said nothing since.

Whether or not high winds were a factor, the fact is that state and federal legislative changes to building codes, including the privatisation of building certification, have undermined building safety. As planning minister, Hazzard is directly responsible for these issues.

The federal Labor government has made no official comment, but its actions speak louder than words. Earlier this month it deported Jianwei "Jason" Zeng, one of only two eyewitnesses from the apartment where the fire erupted, back to China. The other witness,

Yinuo "Ginger" Jiang, was seriously injured when she jumped and is still in hospital.

Zeng, who reported to police after the fire, was questioned and then incarcerated in Villawood Immigration Detention Centre where he was held for five weeks and isolated from friends. Zeng's deportation is not only an attack on his democratic right to remain in Australia but also prevents crucial information being revealed about the blaze.

Questioned by the WSWs, media spokesmen from Immigration Minister Chris Bowen's office refused to provide any information about the Chinese student's treatment.

These responses are another demonstration of the callous indifference for ordinary working people by governments, Labor and Liberal, which serve the interests of the property developers, real estate speculators and the financial elite as a whole. The real factors that led to the death of Connie Zhang and the Bankstown apartment disaster will only be revealed by the independent action by workers, students and youth.



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