

Eye-witnesses raise concerns about Bankstown fire tragedy

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Amne Eldib, whose pharmacy is directly opposite the Euro Terraces building that was engulfed by fire on September 6, and her co-worker, Susie, were eye-witnesses when two Chinese students jumped from a fifth-floor window in a desperate attempt to escape the flames. Together with other staff in the shop, and scores of people in the street outside, they watched helplessly as the two young women leapt, one to her death and the other to suffer serious injuries, some minutes before the fire brigade arrived with the ladders and other equipment that could have save them. From the front door of the pharmacy, it was less than 50 metres to the window ledge, but no one in the shop could do anything to help the two students, except to repeatedly call the triple 0 emergency number.

The pharmacist and her assistant gave an interview to the World Socialist Web Site, raising their serious concerns about a number of issues, starting with the length of time that it took for the fire and ambulance services to arrive at the scene. Successive governments, Labor and Liberal, have seriously eroded the manning levels of these services over the past three decades. The two pharmacy workers also voiced opposition to the fact that the building's residents, many of whom are their customers, have been left without any decent alternative accommodation, as well as the Bankstown City Council's approval of the unsafe building and the overall domination of private profit interests over human life.

WSWS: Please start by telling us what happened on the day.

Susie: We were serving a customer when we all heard a bang. The customer went outside and said, "Oh my god, there is a fire up there. I can see smoke." After that bang there were three more bangs, like electrical explosions.

Amne Eldib: When the fire started, it wasn't that big and there was only a bit of smoke. After we went out to look, we called triple 0 straight away.

Susie: I called and they said the building alarm had already gone off and they are aware of the situation. But they kept transferring me. I waited for a long time before I could talk to someone. We waited, and then the flames started to come through the girls' apartment and one of them got onto the ledge. She then backed off, as she was too scared. We called again—another colleague on her mobile and me again on this landline—and the fire brigade said they had four trucks on the way. It was longer than I expected. It took too long. We were all out there and the girls were screaming. It was just horrifying.

Amne Eldib: We called, saying there were two human beings about to jump, where's the police? There were none, no ambulances either.

Susie: We couldn't help them. We felt helpless. And many of the residents, our customers, said to us that there was so much smoke in the corridors they couldn't see where they were going.

WSWS: How long did it take for the fire brigade to arrive?

Susie: I think it was about 20 minutes after we first called triple 0. The police came first, and when they did, they parked down the end of the street. They did nothing before the fire brigade came, but it was too late anyway. The girls had already jumped.

Amne Eldib: People tried to help. The people at Volcanos [a restaurant on the ground floor of the apartment building] tried to help, but they didn't have the facilities.

Susie: It's a terrible thing to live with... I feel guilty,

wondering what I could have done to help those girls.

WSWS: The fire brigade is very over-stretched because of years of government cuts and underfunding. The Bankstown unit has only four men on duty. It was attending a chemical factory accident at the time, so units had to come from other suburbs. A fire officer told us that the delay would have only added a few minutes to the response time.

Susie: But those minutes could have saved the girls.

Amne Eldib: Since I came to Bankstown in 1988, the population has more than doubled. It is very busy, with more buildings and units. Why is it that none of the services—the police, fire brigade and ambulances—were there when we needed them?

WSWS: Are you aware of fire alarm problems with the building?

Susie: At least once a week, fire trucks would come because of a false alarm. I honestly think the fire brigade thought this was a false alarm.

WSWS: The building's tenants and apartment owners have been locked out of their homes for over a month now.

Susie: Many of the tenants came in here and said they had nowhere to sleep. One resident said: "I've been just sleeping anywhere. Even on benches. I've got no money." There was an Indian lady with four kids and she said the same thing: "We only have enough money to pay for the mortgage. Now the bank wants repayments. What do we do and where do we go?"

Who takes the responsibility? No-one. I think there should be a law, or a rule, which says that if something like this happens, give them the money and then sort it out later.

WSWS: Who was responsible for the unsafe conditions in the building?

Susie: The fire was an accident. It wasn't the girls' fault because the [Bankstown City] Council approved the building. So it is really the council that should look at the situation. Builders go by the rules, and if it was wrong, the building shouldn't have been OK'd.

Amne Eldib: There should be better buildings built, but unfortunately you can tell that particular building is not suitable for a person to live in. There is no fire safety. I wouldn't live in that building. It is important that we get more information, as it is our right. I want to write a letter to the council about how they make it

easy for the developers to build things like that. It's not acceptable.

WSWS: We have also discovered that Euro Terraces was built in 2009 with government stimulus package subsidies under the federal Labor government's National Rental Affordability Scheme.

Amne Eldib: How could they let them live in a place not suitable to live? I'd rather live in a tent without fire and without suffering.

WSWS: What do you know about the role of private certifiers, whom the developers employ themselves to certify that buildings are fit for occupation?

Susie: I had no idea this was going on. It's like the government is taking the easy way out. You know how much corruption would be going on in the building industry, with people being paid off to say this building is OK. They shouldn't allow this.

WSWS: The fundamental problem, at the end of the day, is the domination of the profit system.

Amne Eldib: It is the power of money. The big eat the small. This is our lot unfortunately, but what about the human feeling? ... It is not good for our children to live like that. I always think about my daughter... If she lived in an apartment because she couldn't afford to live in a house, would she have to jump if a fire happened?



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