

Australia: Police called in against Bankstown fire survivor

Richard Phillips
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An incident at the fire-damaged Euro Terraces apartment block in Bankstown yesterday underscores the contempt with which hundreds of displaced residents are being treated by the governments—federal state and local—responsible for both the blaze and the dire situation that they continue to confront.

An Iraqi resident, his wife and son were prevented by security guards from using three shopping trolleys to remove their possessions from the shut-down building. The middle-aged man, who has heart problems and a bad back, was told he could not use the trolleys. Angry and upset, he began shouting at building security staff before being physically restrained by other residents.

Within 10 minutes, three cars with six police officers pulled up outside the apartment block. While they made no arrests, their deployment was clearly designed to intimidate the increasingly frustrated Euro Terraces residents.

The multi-storey building in the southwest Sydney suburb was severely damaged when a fire swept through a fifth floor apartment on September 6. A Chinese student, Connie Zhang, died when she jumped from a balcony to try and escape the flames, while another was seriously injured. There was no sprinkler system in the 10-level building. Scores of people were trapped by dense smoke and had to be rescued by fire crews.

Four weeks after the disaster, hundreds of residents—primarily immigrant working class families and students—remain homeless, forced to live in various kinds of temporary accommodation, with only limited access to their property. At the same time, they have been told that it could be months before they can return to their homes, pending repairs and the removal of an atrium roof that dangerously trapped smoke in the building.

Residents are only allowed to enter their apartments three

times a week to obtain small items, and just for 15 minutes at a time. These arbitrary restrictions have led to several confrontations between security guards and residents, who need furniture, electrical equipment and other vital items.

What meagre accommodation support the fire survivors received immediately after the tragedy has ended, and they have been left to fend for themselves. They have no idea what is going to happen to their apartment building, including whether it can be made fully fire safe and structurally sound.

Ahmed, who witnessed yesterday's altercation, told the WSWS that the Euro Terrace residents were being "treated like rubbish."

"This Iraqi man is my friend," he said, "and all he wanted was to get some of the things he needs. Everyone is under pressure but the people in charge didn't want to listen to anything he said.

"Some people who were renting apartments have now found other places to rent. They can't afford to buy new furniture but they're being stopped from getting their old furniture. We need someone to tell us how long all this business is going to take, and we need a big seminar to discuss these things," Ahmed said.

Nawaf, a resident and a student, told the WSWS on Saturday that he was denied permission to get a small microwave oven from his apartment. His wife is six months pregnant and they have a nine-month old baby.

The couple have no furniture in their current accommodation and desperately needed the microwave to heat their food. "They told me it was furniture and I couldn't take it. This is ridiculous and I'm very upset," he said.

All three governments involved—the federal Labor

government, the New South Wales state Liberal government and the local Bankstown City Council—have washed their hands of any responsibility for the causes of the fire, and the plight of the survivors.

Last Tuesday evening, residents were shut out of a closed-door meeting of Bankstown city councillors, organised by newly-elected Labor Party mayor Khal Asfour. Residents who attempted to attend in order to demand answers to their questions and temporary accommodation were confronted by security guards.

Three days later, on September 28, the council issued an “information sheet” formally denying any responsibility for the tragedy, the repairs or the lack of any alternative accommodation for residents.

The document declared: “Under law, the unit owners are responsible through their Strata Management, Agent and insurers to address any structural and operational issues at 4 West Terrace.” In other words, all liability and cost for the repair and safety modifications to the building must be paid, directly or indirectly, by the working class residents.

The document then announced: “Only strata management and the building insurers can tell you how long the work being carried out will take.” As for accommodation, unit owners were told to contact their insurance company, while tenants were advised to ask Housing NSW, a state government agency, for help, on the condition that they must pay Housing NSW rent equivalent to their rent at Euro Terraces.

Finally, the document stated: “Bankstown City Council did not approve the construction of 4 West Terrace or its occupation. The approval process was carried out by a private certifier commissioned by the developer. As a result, Council was not entitled to be part of the process.”

This is a lie. All development projects must be approved by local government. The Bankstown council agreed to the original development application in 2003 and an amended version in 2005. Under the de-regulation regime introduced by the former state Labor government in 1998, developers hire private certifiers to issue occupancy certificates, but even these documents must still be lodged with the council.

Yesterday, Bankstown council announced a one-day safety expo next Saturday in the local shopping centre. The event, entitled “Council puts resident safety first,” is a crude attempt to shift the burden of responsibility for fire safety

from developers, construction companies and governments, onto the residents themselves.

The expo will include resuscitation demonstrations by ambulance personnel and presentations by fire and emergency officers on “how to respond to a kitchen fire.” Mayor Asfour claimed that it would be “an opportunity for residents to pick up safety tips” that could “prevent needless tragedies in our community.”

Some of the immense difficulties facing the residents are revealed in the situation facing **Mohamad**, who is sleeping at the Arabic-language community radio station where he works. “I spent two days at a motel in Banksia—where NSW Housing sent me—but it was impossible,” he told the WSWS.

“[NSW Housing] said I should spend two more days there but I couldn’t stay because I start work at 6am and don’t have a car. I’ve been sleeping on the couch at my work since then, but there is no shower and I have to wash at my friend’s place.”

Commenting on the Bankstown council’s claim that it did not know about the smoke-blocking atrium roof,” he said: “This means there are many other mistakes in the building and other apartments in Bankstown. We’ve been told the roof will be removed, but then rain will pour onto the inside walkways. They’re fixing up one problem and creating another.

“There should be a proper investigation into what has happened here. It’s wrong and everyone is very unhappy and frustrated. There’s something wrong in the council and with the government. In Arabic we say, ‘It’s business.’ If these people aren’t going to solve our problems, then we’ll start sleeping in the building’s car park.”



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