

# Residents find no answers at Bankstown Council's safety expo

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Bankstown City Council held its annual community safety expo last Saturday, one month after the tragic fire at the Euro Terraces apartments that claimed the life of one young woman, and left another seriously injured.

The council holds the expo annually, as a public relations exercise to put on a show of concern for the safety and well-being of the city's residents, who are among the most disadvantaged, on average, in Australia, with high rates of poverty, unemployment and heavy-density housing.

While the Euro Terraces apartments are located just a couple of hundred metres from the Bankstown Centro shopping mall where the expo was held, none of the displays made any mention of the disaster, or volunteered any information about how such an unsafe building could have been approved in an area under the council's jurisdiction.

The building contained no fire sprinklers, had an apparently unlicensed atrium roof that dangerously hemmed in the smoke, and contained weak or faulty fire doors. Its fire alarms had blared out intermittently, without apparent cause, since the building was completed in 2009, so no-one initially took any notice when it sounded on the day of the deathly blaze.

Seven agencies had stalls at the event: the State Emergency Service, Bankstown City Council, Neighbourhood Watch, New South Wales (NSW) Police, NSW Fire and Rescue, Ambulance NSW and St John Ambulance. Council staff gave passers-by bags with brochures, pamphlets and council merchandise.

As far as fire safety was concerned, the central message was that it was up to individuals to ensure their own protection. Residents in high rise buildings were urged to regularly check their fire alarms, know how to use stairwell fire hoses and extinguishers, and prepare emergency exit strategies. Bankstown Mayor Khal Asfour reinforced this theme in a media release, saying that tips at the expo could "help save lives and prevent needless tragedies in our community."

NSW Fire and Rescue distributed a fact sheet, entitled, "HighWise: Safe Living in High Rise Buildings." It stated that each apartment in residential buildings of four storeys or higher was designed to protect people from fires in other apartments. What followed was a lengthy checklist of 13 activities residents should perform to ensure their own safety, such as not altering the "certified fire resistant door" at the front of their apartments and not interfering with sprinkler heads.

Remarkably, the fact sheet assumed that fire sprinklers were installed in such buildings, and that certified fire doors and other certified safety equipment actually existed. It was precisely the lack of such essential measures that contributed to the September 6 tragedy.

Like many thousands of others across Australia, the Euro Terraces residents had been led to believe that they were living in a perfectly safe building. Most were completely unaware of the role played by governments, federal, state and local, in watering down and deregulating construction and fire safety laws over the past three decades. The expo did nothing to clarify them.

Socialist Equality Party supporters distributed copies of the party's statement, "The Bankstown fire tragedy: vital issues for workers, students and youth," calling on workers, young people and all those concerned about deteriorating housing and other social conditions, to attend a public meeting in Bankstown on October 15 to initiate an independent investigation into the circumstances surrounding the fire.

Workers and young people who spoke to the WSWs at the expo expressed concerns about the fact that government authorities had allowed unsafe buildings to be erected and operated. Several pointed to the underlying web of relationships between governments, property developers, construction companies, landlords and financial institutions that have all profited from the sale and rent of apartments.

**Phil**, an IT worker, commented on the fact that the Euro Terraces building was just under the 25-metre height for the compulsory installation of sprinklers. He said: "There's going to be more fires and more lives lost in the name of skimming off a few profits. Everyone is trying to get under the limits and make as much money as they can."

Phil said governments were responsible, not individual residents. "You have to legislate," he said. "You can't have self-legislation—it simply doesn't work." He drew a comparison with what he and his wife had seen in China. "It's the same sort of thing. They [China] are rapidly expanding and building sub-standard buildings."

**Donna**, a film student, said the government should take responsibility for safety, instead of putting the burden on individuals. Originally from the Philippines, she said, "The government should do something about this because they didn't inspect the building properly themselves. They should also do more for old properties, like giving them fire extinguishers to help save lives."

Asked why she thought sub-standard buildings were being approved and certified, Donna commented: "Money talks. The government is scared. They have the

money and they have the power and they can do something about it." When WSWs supporters explained the Socialist Equality Party's campaign for an independent investigation by the working class, against the cover-up efforts of the political establishment, she said: "I think that's the best idea, because if the government doesn't do something about it, who will?"

**Adam**, a photocopy maintenance worker, and a former resident of the Euro Terraces complex, said he had earlier moved out of his apartment there because he did not feel safe. "I lived in the complex, just around the corner, for two years and it wasn't safe. The apartments weren't the best; they were done on the cheap by the looks of it. There were lots of cracks in the building, and the foundation wasn't that good."

**Vineet**, who works in the finance industry, was concerned about declining building standards. "Especially if the building is that big, with that many people living in it, you need to meet all the standards. Don't risk everyone for the sake of money! If they can build like that, then it's a third world nation, not a developed nation."

Vineet opposed cuts by federal and state governments to fire and other emergency services. "I can't understand why they have the policy of building a budget surplus. What's the point of having a surplus if your services are low? If you're making a surplus by cutting departments, that's like making a surplus by snatching money from the people. We need to give more money [to the emergency services], not less."

Vineet agreed that the council's expo was a diversion from the underlying causes of the September 6 fire. "This [expo] is to show they [the council] are concerned, but also to say that we people are responsible, not the authorities."



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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