

Bankstown fire victim deported from Australia

Mike Head
12 October 2012

The Australian Labor government yesterday deported Jianwei “Jason” Zeng, the young Chinese man who lived in the apartment engulfed by fire in the Sydney suburb of Bankstown on September 6. Zeng had been incarcerated in the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre since the day after the tragedy, on the grounds that his visa had expired.

The young man’s removal from the country is not only a denial of his basic democratic right to live in Australia, but another expression of the callous attitude of all levels of government—federal, state and local—toward the working class victims of the fire, including the students who lived in the Euro Terraces building.

As far as the Labor government is concerned, international students like Zeng and his flatmates are simply cash cows to be milked by education institutions, landlords and cheap labour employers, and then sent packing as soon as they have served their purpose.

Zeng was an eyewitness to the fire and could have provided crucial evidence about how it erupted, what caused it, and why it spread so rapidly, becoming an inferno with temperatures estimated at 1,000 degrees. He was inside the apartment when the blaze began, but managed to escape. Pingkang “Connie” Zhang died, and Yinuo “Ginger” Jiang was seriously injured when they jumped 15 metres from a bedroom window to escape the flames.

In the 24 hours after the fire had shattered the lives of these young people, the police launched a manhunt for Zeng, feeding the media suggestions that he may have

caused the fire by smoking on the balcony. “It’s one of our lines of inquiry,” a police spokeswoman told Australian Associated Press on September 7. Mug shots of the student were published throughout the media, giving the impression that he was a wanted man.

The police innuendo served a definite purpose—to divert attention away from the deeply disturbing issues immediately raised by the fire, such as the building’s fire safety defects, which residents were already reporting, including regular false alarms, flimsy fire doors, a lack of fire sprinklers and an atrium roof that trapped the thick black smoke and endangered their lives as they tried to escape.

On the evening of September 7, Zeng presented himself to a police station, where he was questioned. The next day, a New South Wales Police spokeswoman said he would not be charged with any offence, but had already been handed over to immigration authorities. For the next five weeks, he was detained at Villawood, cut off from his friends and family.

Immigration Minister Chris Bowen’s office refused to provide any information about Zeng’s deportation. An immigration department spokesman also refused to give the *World Socialist Web Site* any details, except to confirm that Zeng had been removed, and that he had “no outstanding issues” with the police, the coroner or the department itself.

The spokesman’s reference to the coroner raises further important questions. No coronial inquiry into the fire has been announced, yet it is patently obvious that Zeng’s account of what happened on the day of the blaze, and all the surrounding circumstances, would be

a critical component of any investigation into Connie Zhang's death.

The Labor government's decision to deport Zeng anyway represents an extraordinary pre-emptive move against establishing the truth of what happened, and of who was responsible. Moreover, it is another demonstration of the reactionary character of the "border protection" regime erected by successive Labor and Liberal governments. So-called "illegal" immigrants, especially workers and students with few or no resources, struggle to survive without official documentation while at the same time trying to evade sudden deportation at the hands of immigration officials and police. Like refugees and asylum seekers, they are denied their basic democratic right to live and work in Australia.

Zeng's deportation is also in line with the official indifference displayed toward the residents of the Euro Terraces building, who have been given no answers to their many questions about the fire, and left to find their own alternative accommodation.

In its latest notice circulated to residents, issued on Wednesday, Bankstown City Council, which is controlled by the Labor Party, announced that the company repairing and rectifying the building estimates that it will take another four weeks to complete the work. This means it will be another month, at least, before residents can move back into their homes. Yet the council, which approved the construction of the building, has again washed its hands of any responsibility to assist them.

Even when the repair work is completed in the apartment building, there will be no fire sprinklers and there has been no assurance that the residents' other fire safety concerns, such as the alarms and inadequate doors, will be resolved.

The Socialist Equality Party has called a public meeting in Bankstown on Monday to discuss the critical economic, political and social issues raised by the fire tragedy. We urge all those concerned about the fundamental social rights of the working class, including the right to safe and affordable housing, to

participate in the discussion.

Baptist Church Hall
Corner of Stanley and Leonard streets
Bankstown

Monday October 15, 7 pm

For more information see "SEP calls public meeting to initiate investigation into Bankstown fire"



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact