

Bankstown tragedy highlights fire service cuts

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The fatal apartment fire in Bankstown on September 6 raises crucial questions about the impact of relentless cuts by successive governments, Labor and Liberal alike, to the already over-stretched fire and emergency services.

Seeking to escape flames from a fire of great intensity—reportedly reaching temperatures of 1,000 degrees centigrade—two young Chinese students jumped from a window of a fifth-floor unit in the Bankstown Euro Terraces project. The first fire truck did not arrive until some minutes later.

Two eye-witnesses have given interviews to the WSWs saying they were horrified by the delay, and suggesting that it might have been 20 minutes before the fire brigade got to the scene. (See: “Eye-witnesses raise concerns about Bankstown fire tragedy”)

Fire officers told the WSWs that the Bankstown fire station has only one unit, manned by four firefighters, on duty at any time. There are two other fire stations within the Bankstown municipality, at Revesby and Chester Hill, but each is similarly small. Between them, these stations cover a population of more than 185,000 people, as well as several major retail and industrial areas, and Sydney’s main small aircraft airport, Bankstown Airport, which was previously manned by federal firefighters.

When the Euro Terraces fire began, the Bankstown unit was fighting an industrial chemical spill at Strathfield, about 10 kilometres away. As a result, fire trucks were dispatched from Revesby—which according to a taxi-metering web site, is 7 kilometres and 10 minutes’ travelling time from Bankstown—and Lakemba, 5 kilometres and 9 minutes away. That extra travelling time may have been a factor contributing to the death of one of the students, and the serious injury of the other.

For decades, governments—Labor and Liberal—have run down the fire service. The number of firefighters has been

outstripped by the population growth in Australia’s cities and suburbs, as well as by the complexity of the challenges posed in fighting fires in modern factories, office towers, shopping malls and residential buildings. In particular, increasingly prevalent high-rise apartment complexes have dramatically altered the fire-fighting landscape.

Over the past decade alone, Fire and Rescue NSW annual reports show that the statewide number of full-time fire officers increased by 15 percent between 1999-2000 and 2010-11, from 3,048 to 3,516, but that the population they served rose by 25 percent over the same period, from 5.8 million to 7.3 million. That represents an almost 10 percent decline per resident.

The annual reports also reveal an accompanying deterioration in response times. In 1999-2000, NSW fire trucks arrived at 95 percent of fires in homes or other structures within the target of 10 minutes after a call being received at the fire brigade dispatch centre. By 2011-12 that figure had dropped to 90 percent within 11.5 minutes.

The previous state Labor government, in office from 1995 to 2010, bears the primary responsibility for this erosion of the fire service. These response times will lengthen further because the current Liberal government has cut \$70 million from the budget of Fire and Rescue NSW over the next four years. This is part of the austerity program being imposed by every state government, and spearheaded by the federal Labor government. These cuts will inevitably create the conditions for further fire disasters.

One fire officer told the WSWs that Premier Barry O’Farrell’s government had threatened to eliminate 300 firefighters’ jobs unless other cuts to staffing costs were made to deliver the budget reduction. He pointed out that these cutbacks would mean that the lives of firefighters would be at greater risk, as well as those of residents.

The fire officer also explained the added difficulties presented by apartment complexes, such as Euro Terraces, where there are multitudes of varying alarms and other fire safety devices, such as fire hoses, hydrants and extinguishers, all installed by different private companies.

In many cases, because of government de-regulation, designed to cut developers' building costs, these fittings are "self-certified." That is, the company that provided the equipment also certified its quality, without any inspection by the local council or fire brigade. As a result, the equipment is not always reliable, and fire trucks must carry a range of different appliances to match whatever devices firefighters find inside a building.

It is not just governments that have created these conditions. Over the past three decades, the trade unions have become thoroughly integrated into the corporate establishment, systematically suppressing the resistance of workers to the ever-deepening attacks on jobs, working conditions and public services.

The anger building up among firefighters was displayed on June 21, when they walked out for 12 hours, their first major strike in NSW since 1956, to fight the government's halving of workers' compensation payments for all public sector workers to 13 weeks. Fire trucks drove into Sydney city and turned their hoses on parliament house in a display of disgust.

The Fire Brigade Employees Union (FBEU), however, then accepted a deal to exempt firefighters from the WorkCover attack, and called off all further action, effectively separating them from the thousands of other public sector workers in struggle against the government's workers' compensation changes and sweeping job cuts.

At a special general meeting of FBEU on September 7, firefighters voted 1,220 to 803 to reject a deal that the union struck with the O'Farrell government following the announced budget cuts. But, under the guise of avoiding outright redundancies, the union agreed to overtime reductions and roster changes to help "reduce employee-related expenditure to the required level." It also pledged to "work cooperatively" with the government and the Fire and Rescue NSW management to "achieve this outcome."

In effect, the union is collaborating with the O'Farrell government to implement changes that will increase the dangers faced by residents and firefighters alike, as fire stations periodically shut down because of short-staffing and fire crews work longer shifts.

In a September 12 bulletin, FBEU state secretary Jim Casey declared that he "respected" the rejection of the deal by members. Two days later, however, he announced that the budget dispute had been referred to the NSW Industrial Relations Commission, "with the union reaffirming its strong preference for the reduction of overtime over TOLing [taking fire officers off line] and the loss of firefighter jobs." In other words, the FBEU leadership intends to push ahead with the thrust of its sellout package, via the industrial court.

Running down of fire services and the threat to firefighters' jobs only heightens the danger of further disasters like the Euro Terraces fire in working class suburbs. Together with the rest of the trade union movement, the FBEU has not said a word about the Bankstown fire. The Socialist Equality Party has called a public meeting on Monday night in Bankstown to begin an independent examination of all the factors that contributed to this tragedy. We encourage firefighters to attend and speak out about what they know and the worsening conditions they face.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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