

Building workers raise questions about Bankstown fire

Our reporters
20 October 2012

A public meeting in Bankstown organised by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) this week issued a call for building workers, as well as others with specialist knowledge, to help clarify how and why the deadly fire at the Euro Terraces complex in Bankstown on September 6 was able to occur.

The meeting voted unanimously for the establishment of an independent committee to independently investigate all the circumstances surrounding the blaze, which claimed the life of a Chinese student and seriously injured another. (see: “SEP public meeting calls for Bankstown fire investigation”).

Three building workers in Bankstown spoke to the WSWs about the impact of poor building standards, the de-regulation of building codes and the certification process by Labor governments, and the underlying housing affordability crisis.

Casper, a steelfixer, told the WSWs he was very concerned about the safety of apartment blocks being erected in areas like Bankstown, some of which he helped build. “Some of the regulations or standards in the building industry need to be improved, especially in the type of buildings like the one where this fire occurred,” he commented.

Poor building rules and lack of official inspections had allowed developers to build apartment complexes with small and confined spaces, creating problems for residents trying to evacuate in the event of a fire. “In some of the buildings that we have been doing, there are a lot of critical facilities required, especially for units. Some units, and even the corridors, are so small that you barely have space to move.”

Casper pointed to design flaws in buildings: “They are sometimes unsafe. There must be exits where everyone easily has access to them. Some of the units even have problems with the location of electrical and other wiring, as might have happened in this fire. We should consider other means for people to live in safety in these areas.”

Another factor was the lack of ongoing inspection of buildings once they were completed, Casper said. “There should be routine check-ups on some of these buildings, like every three months. Once these buildings are built, no one goes back to check on them again, because they’re brand new, until a disaster occurs.”

The steelfixer had worked in the Australian construction industry for about two years, initially as a waterproofer. “I have worked on some of the buildings in this area,” he explained. “Formerly I was an architect in the Cook Islands. I went into the construction industry because I wanted to get more of a feeling for the Australian design and building, especially with tall buildings.”

Casper condemned the system of “private certification” introduced by the former state Labor government in New South Wales in 1998 to permit property developers to employ certifiers to issue safety and occupancy certificates for buildings, without any inspection by the local council that had approved the project.

“Where I come from we have building inspectors, and they double check before a building is constructed

and that there is safety maintenance,” Casper commented. “Safety is paramount. A lot of developers here are greedy—that would be the term I would use. They don’t really think of the lives of other people, and about the situations that can arise.

“This de-regulation in Australia is a mistake that we should solve, or it will be a problem for future generations, with developers dominating over some of the big projects. We need to send the message out to ordinary people.”

Mohamad, a young building worker, was scathing about the quality of many buildings. “Most of the building is really dodgy, especially in Sydney,” he commented. “I have seen missing bars, walls in wrong places, missing columns—whatever!”

Sometimes this occurred in major complexes, “such as shopping malls, as well as in apartment blocks,” Mohamad emphasised, highlighting the potential risks facing large numbers of people.

The young worker, who had friends living in the Euro Terraces complex, the site of the September 6 tragedy, raised several questions about the quality and fire safety of the project. He described it as a “very flimsy construction” with “plaster board walls with wood inside, even between units.”

Asked about the safety conditions of building workers, he replied: “I can’t see safety at all, including on the job. Once I was working on level 5 of a project, and the safety scaffolding had not even reached us.”

Samih, a crane operator who lived in the Euro Terraces complex, said he had not been aware of safety problems in the building, except that the fire alarms had gone off up to two or three times a week for periods of months.

Having worked in the building industry for 13 years, however, he had seen construction companies “cut corners” on projects. He described some apartment buildings he had worked on as “shonky,” with defects that later caused major delays in completion and certification. One of the worst practices was the refusal

of companies or sub-contractors to employ licensed tradesmen because “they want to get someone on the cheap.”

Samih was highly critical of the stimulus packages implemented by the federal Labor government in 2008 and 2009 to bail out the construction companies, including the school hall building program, the home ceiling insulation scheme and the rental affordability program that subsidised the completion of apartment blocks like Euro Terraces.

“These packages produced buildings of low quality,” he commented. “Workers died on some of them, like with the four who died installing pink bats [ceiling insulation]. And we end up paying later for the money handed to the companies, either in higher taxes or government cuts.”

More broadly, Samih said such programs only reinforced a system that “encouraged developers to build, and young people to borrow,” largely for the benefit of the banks “who get us all into debt.” He accused the Labor Party of working “hand in glove with the developers” in fuelling a vicious circle of rising property prices and mortgage payments.

“When my father came to this country, three decades ago, it took 4.3 times the average wage to buy a house. Now it takes 8-9 times your wage. This is enslaving humanity. We get caught in a debt trap, having to work 12 or 13 hours a day to pay off a mortgage. And there are a lot of foreclosures in areas like southwest Sydney. The level of mortgage stress is unbelievable, with people paying \$400 a week in rent, or \$700 a week to pay off a mortgage.”



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