“The local council and governments have a lot to answer for with this fire.”

Our reporters
22 October 2012

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members and supporters campaigned in Bankstown over the weekend, discussing with residents the necessity for an independent working class investigation into the Bankstown fire tragedy of September 6. They distributed hundreds of WSWS articles and copies of the resolution adopted by the public meeting organised by the SEP in Bankstown last week.

The resolution warned that any official investigation would only cover-up the truth about the fatal fire in Euro Terraces Building B and its underlying causes, and called on workers, students and youth to help establish a committee to independently investigate all the circumstances surrounding the fire (see: “SEP meeting resolution on the Bankstown fire ”).

WSWS reporters interviewed a range of people about the need for such an investigation, which would bring together the eye-witness accounts, experiences and knowledge of working people, and experts such as firefighters, construction workers, housing specialists, and municipal council and legal workers.

Graeme, a railway worker, commented: “The local council and the governments have a lot to answer for with this fire. Of course they’re going to cover everything up. I would put money on it! Who’s going to admit they were responsible? Who approved the building? If the [Bankstown City] Council denies approving it, then who did? They are all battening down the hatches. Everyone is scattering to avoid any blame.”

The railway worker condemned the fact that Euro Terraces had been built just centimetres below the 25-metre height level that required fire sprinklers to be installed in the apartment complex. “How cynical is that, to build just below the 25-metre mark? How much money do developers make from these kinds of buildings? It must be millions. Yet, they are scamming on fire safety.”

Graeme said he had seen “a lot of safety compromises in the railways as well,” after years of cuts by one government after the other. “We have no staff, or minimum staff, on train stations, and if anything goes wrong, we are on our own.” He sympathised with the firefighters, who had faced similar cuts. “Every government just goes closer to the bone,” he said.

Summing up his support for an independent working class investigation into the fire, Graeme said: “Nothing will change unless ordinary people stand up.”

Jolene, a cleaner, said an independent investigation was essential so that the victims of the fire, and their families, and the entire community, could get answers. She described the fire, which she had seen from the street, as “horrific”. She said the government could not be trusted to hold an inquiry, because “if they cover up, what is that going to mean for other people who want to live in safe homes?”

Jolene asked: “How could this building be built, if the council did not approve it?” She condemned the building law changes introduced by the former state Labor government in 1998 to permit developers to hire “private certifiers” to sign off on buildings without council inspection. “That’s ridiculous, to the highest degree, because a person lost her life in this fire. It’s all about money-making, not the need for people to have a safe home for their children.

“That’s why I think it should be investigated by the general public, and if it comes back that the building was unsatisfactory, then someone has to be held accountable.”

Jolene spoke about the housing affordability crisis that led to low-income people living in apartment complexes such as Euro Terraces. “That building was supposed to be built for cheap accommodation, under a government scheme, but they

© World Socialist Web Site

were selling the apartments for more than $300,000. That's not affordable housing. Affordable housing used to be public housing … but now there's a 25-year waiting list.

"I get $500 a week, and $200 of that goes on rent, because I share with my friends. I can't even afford to get a mortgage. How am I supposed to raise my kids, and pay for all this? The government does not care, and they don't care about the fire in the building. They don't care about anything."

Commenting on the impact of the worsening global economic crisis, the cleaner said: "We are paying for the debt. The poor get poorer, there is no middle class anymore, and the rich keep getting richer, just like in America. Labor or Liberal makes no difference, that's the sad part about it."

Mario, who lives in an adjoining building to Euro Terraces, said he agreed "absolutely" with the need for an independent investigation. "I think the way things are going at the moment there is all shortcuts and making profits, which makes the community unsafe and it's time to do something about it. If we all put our hands together, we can achieve something."

Mario did not believe that an official inquiry would conduct a proper investigation. "Obviously not," he stated. "We have to get to a point where we all stand together, rather than allowing people to get kickbacks. They [the city council] approve things but no-one is concerned about safety."

Voicing concerns about his apartment, Mario explained: "If any fire happens, we only have an exit lift and fire door, but we don't have windows to let air in or out the hallways. So if there is a fire, the smoke is going to come inside the unit and you have no choice but to inhale it. You would not be able to escape. There is a fire hose in the hallway, but how are you meant to get to it if the floor is on fire? You're trapped in your apartment and forced to look at option B, jumping from the balcony."

Sharif, an engineering student at the University of New South Wales, said the fact that two students had to jump from a window to escape the fire was "terrible", adding: "It's an unnecessary loss of life, and I think there are things that could have been done to prevent it."

The student explained why some of his university friends were living in over-crowded apartments, with similar safety dangers. "I earn $10.90 an hour—near the minimum wage—in a fast food place. The majority of the students I work with are overseas exchange students, and they are being exploited, that's what I would call it.

"A lot of people at work have told me about these kinds of apartments. Basically, they are share houses. My friend who's living in the city lives in a room about 7 metres by 7 metres, with a bed and table and that's all. And he's paying $150 a week rent, with probably 10 or so other people living in the apartment."

Sharif supported the call for a working class investigation, commenting that firefighters "would know about these things" and "we could get lawyers to check the laws and people to come in to inspect the buildings, and others who know about the public records. We need people with the know-how.

"We cannot trust the local government, because clearly they had some part in giving this kind of development approval. And the state and federal governments, which wrote the laws and provided the money for the building, want to save face."

Grant, a rural worker visiting Bankstown, said: "Safety standards have to improve, especially where gas or electricity is involved, because that makes a fire go right off in these apartments."

Grant had no faith in official inquiries. "There is too much money at stake. The people in power are looking after where the money is. We need some good lawyers to look at the regulations, and how the money is moved around. Also the general public has to be aware of what's going on, with the New South Wales government and the people at the top … [former NSW Labor premier] Bob Carr has got a lot to answer for by bringing in the changes to the building laws."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site