

Chinese student group condemns unsafe and over-crowded housing

Mark Church
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The WSWS spoke to Karen, a representative of New Voice, a Chinese-language blog run by former international students that provides support to Chinese students in Australia, about the Bankstown fire and the housing conditions faced by international students in Sydney.

Mark Church: What concerns do you have about the Bankstown fire?

Karen: The one thing I'm really concerned about is the Bankstown council saying that the building plan was perfect [for the Euro Terraces complex], and the builder and private certifier saying they did the right thing. They did the inspection and the building is perfect. I feel that people are trying to get away from this case saying, "it's not my issue."

MC: What do overseas students face in finding accommodation?

K: The students come to Australia and they have to earn money for their own expenses, so that's why they try to spend as little as they can. So they share accommodation with other students, for example, having 2-3 or 4 to a room. It depends on the suburb. If you are near a university, the landlord knows the rent is expensive, so he suggests that you share to cut the rental down. So, to save money, students put themselves into very dangerous situations.

MC: Has anything been done to help these students?

K: I have to blame the government because I'm so disappointed about what has been done. The Australian government pays lots of money to encourage students

to come to Australia. When they come to Australia, everything changes. There's not much support for international students and they pay very high study fees. They are really isolated and no-one cares. When the Bankstown tragedy happened, I couldn't see what the government had done for them; it has done nothing.

MC: Who do you think is responsible for this situation?

K: I do believe the first responsibility lies with the government. Landlords want to make money, but if you don't have the law to protect students, then the owners will just do what they want to do. Sleep 3-4 to a room and the council does nothing. They say, oh you paid the rates and that's it. They say, oh you paid the council fee and that's it. Once someone dies, they might decide to do something, but then later they just step out again.

MC: What kind of help did you receive as a new student?

K: I got nothing. On the first enrolment day, the university just gave me a brochure, which said nothing on safety issues, just on how to choose your subjects. It has some numbers you can ring. Imagine that you're a new student and you're frightened about coming to a new country and you don't know all the words. How are you meant to reach out? No-one comes and says "how can I help you?"

MC: Is this a common experience?

K: Yes! I remember being frightened in my first tutorial and no-one came and asked if I needed help or counselling. Lots of students have the same experience.

You are lonely and don't know where to go.

MC: Any final comments?

K: I just appreciate what you have done, as not many people are chasing up these things and most of the media doesn't do that anymore. I think your organisation can do much in getting people the truth, because now everything is under the table.



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